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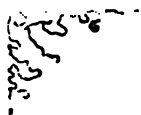
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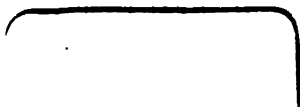


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BROKEN STALKS

CHAPTER I

ONE evening in June, a girl of about twenty was sitting in the hall of her Hampshire home, clasping her knees. She was listening intently for some sound that did not come, and while she waited her face and figure seemed to thrill with pleasurable excitement. Every now and then she bit her lips as if to hide a smile ; she tossed her head, and swung her leg backwards and forwards.

Suddenly Joan Carey bounded from her chair and up the stairs, almost with one effort, for she had heard a door open in the distance. She withdrew into a dark corner on the second landing, and stood still, while she allowed a lady and two gentlemen to pass down the stairs.

‘And you think in a few days she will be

able to walk? You are sure that we run no risk in allowing her to try?’

The lady who asked these questions seemed to be trying in vain to control the excitement in her voice.

‘Yes, yes, Mrs. Carey ; she will walk right enough,’ spoke one of the gentlemen, with the quiet confidence of the experienced medical practitioner. ‘Your wife seems hard to convince,’ he added, turning gravely to the gentleman who was following close behind.

This was a tall, strong-looking man with large, regular features. His hair was tinged with gray, and a rather prominent forehead framed unusually bright blue eyes. Nobody could tell at the first glance whether Mr. Carey was a young or an old man. He smiled as he said gently :

‘There are some miracles, Doctor, which we *dare* not believe too readily.

‘To be sure—to be sure ! After twelve years it does seem almost a miracle,’ answered the other gravely ; ‘but there is no doubt that Miss Millicent will walk and dance and do anything else she likes in a few months’ time.’

In a certain dark corner Joan’s feet gave a kind of pirouette ; they seemed to act spasmodically. After a few moments Joan came

out of her hiding-place, and went downstairs sedately to meet her parents, who had just seen the doctor drive off.

Mrs. Carey ran forward and seized her daughter's hands. Then she sank her head on the girl's shoulder and sobbed bitterly. A queer smile spread over her husband's kindly face.

'You women!' he murmured, as he took his stick and walked out.

Mrs. Carey soon raised her head from its resting-place, straightened her hair, and, linking her arm in that of her daughter, went into the boudoir.

'It's all right, Joan! Millicent is to be as strong as anybody. Oh, isn't it too lovely!' Her voice was full of sobs. Her hysterical gladness made Joan appear quite sober by contrast.

'I should like to go up and see her, mother, but I suppose we had better wait.'

'Yes, dear, till after dinner; we shall all go up then.'

Mrs. Carey sank into a chair for a few moments, but she was much too excited to sit still for long. On the pretence of going out to look for George, she soon got up and went into the garden.

She was a tall, graceful woman, and her face showed unmistakable signs that it had once been beautiful. The eyes and hair were a pretty brown, the forehead and nose well-shaped, but there were traces of a rather weak, discontented disposition about the mouth. She appeared to be a woman who would never get all she wanted out of life, but who would never leave off asking for it.

Indeed, Margaret had found in life's coils a varied collection of gifts—love, anxiety, hope, ambition, dreary struggles and crushing grief, intense joy and insatiable longing. As on this particular evening she walked across the lawn, set with firs and cedars, and sloping down to the salmon-pool, certain tableaux floated across her vision in the form of a panorama. She lived again in the scenes of the past and heard the chief actors speak.

* * * * *

It was Margaret Tuck's ninth birthday, and she was celebrating it by a wonderful picnic. She and the strong, lively boy who sat in front of her, with his mouth disgracefully full of peppermint cream, had carefully planned all arrangements for this important occasion. George Carey belonged to a good family as

well as Margaret, but his father had been unfortunate and lost all his money. He had been a naval officer, but when he died he left to his widow only a small pension, sundry debts, and a name honoured in the service. Mrs. Carey had obtained the post of English teacher in the school where Margaret was educated, and visited it daily, while she lived with her son in a cottage in the neighbouring village. The Lady Principal of the school was much attached to her English teacher, and took considerable interest in George—who was just three years older than Margaret, and could do everything three thousand times better—and helped to ground him in the rudiments of learning. Margaret had hardly been at school a month when she swore, as schoolgirls do, eternal devotion to Mrs. Carey, and even persuaded her aunt to allow her to spend her mid-term holidays at the widow's cottage. The birthday picnic was making delightful progress. Margaret would not for the world have confessed that she felt uncomfortably sick, and that even the thought of another cream cake was a pain to her. George, when his tongue was free enough for articulation, began to edify her with an account of an otter hunt in

which he had borne an heroic part. She was listening in admiring wonder.

Suddenly voices were heard in the shrubbery immediately behind the children.

‘Thank you, my dear Mary. You need not trouble to come further. It was right of you to tell me of Margaret’s disobedience.’

‘There’s Miss Fuller and that sneak, Mary Clive!’ ejaculated George.

In another moment the children had to stand and face the Lady Principal. Both children were severely punished that night. George declared that he had had such a good time that he did not care a jot for what followed. Margaret seemed to care more, and he generously gave in to her feelings. So they renounced clandestine meetings for the future, and thus guarded themselves against the risk of discovery.

* * * * *

Margaret Carey sat down on a seat by one of the largest cedars and peeped again through the mist of years at the clear outlines of her youth.

* * * * *

She saw herself grieving in secret when George was sent off to school, and rejoicing

in his occasional Sunday visits to the Lady Principal. She remembered her delight when her aunt, who was quite satisfied with the Careys' family connections, invited the beloved governess to bring George to spend a few days in each vacation with her niece at her London house. Margaret prided herself still on the precocious genius which she displayed during term-time in coaxing Mrs. Carey to talk about George and his wonderful achievements at school, never causing any surprise at the extent of her interest. At the age of seventeen George returned from school for good, and he began to live at home, going to London every day to learn a merchant's business. In these days he never came to the girls' school, for he looked quite a young man; and the Lady Principal only received young men once a year, at a Christmas party given for her pupils and their brothers. But Margaret remembered that she had been now and then allowed the immense privilege of walking with Mrs. Carey to the end of the school-drive, where young George Carey met his mother in order to escort her home. On these important occasions Margaret and George would only exchange the most formal greeting, and perhaps

a few appropriate words about the weather. But in spite of the passage of years the sweetness of this converse remained with Margaret as she sat this afternoon by the cedar-tree on the lawn, dreaming.

How vividly Margaret remembered those few happy meetings with George, arranged soon after she left school at the house of a mutual friend! How ignorant they both were of the world, and how confident that they knew all that could be known! She was soon convinced that marriage with George could alone save her from despair. Of course he could support her; of course those far-off Anglo-Indian parents, who knew so little of her character and aspirations, would forgive her as they realized the strength of her love. George was a tall, strong, cheery fellow, and his lightest word carried weight. It was easy for him to persuade her that elopements and secret marriages were 'good form' even for young ladies of good breeding, and that he was desperately in love with her, and would certainly drown himself if she refused him.

Margaret heard again to-day the passionate words of her twenty-years-old lover—those words which had forced her protests into

silence, and filled her brain and heart until there was no room for conscientious scruples.

* * * * *

Margaret looked up with a hysterical gasp of gladness, and wiped something from her eyes. Then she saw her husband approaching her with an evening paper under his arm. He looked at her tenderly and protectively as she rose to meet him, but there seemed little romance to-day about his gray head and easy, erect walk.

‘I was thinking over old times, George—our engagement and—and—everything——’ she said with a half sob in her voice.

‘Were you indeed, my dear?’ he said, taking a seat by her side, and pretending to read his paper.

But his thoughts, too, started off on a retrospect of years, marked by some triumphs and many disappointments, and some grief that had by now lost much of its grimness. Had Margaret ever realized his mother’s anguish when she believed that he had acted dishonourably in marrying a young girl of wealth and position merely because he loved her? Was it this fact which had made her often so querulous while she voluntarily added troubles to the number which were inevitable. The terrible Indian letter had seemed for a while to reduce his will to

impotency. But on this June evening George experienced anew the sensation of rage which he had felt when he read Colonel Tuck's promise that Margaret and the young fool who had misled her, should try the experiment of house-keeping on an annual income of sentiment, and that he would do nothing to interfere with their plans. As George Carey bent over his newspaper he smiled as he remembered how effectually that letter had roused him to make a decent home for his wife and to convince his mother that he was no blackguard.

'Poor mother! she didn't want much convincing,' he thought. 'She had enough pride to sympathize with me when I had to smile under Colonel Tuck's displeasure.' So George explained his mother's apparent inconsistency; for, of course, he could never know how her heart had ached when she saw his strong young face begin very soon to look serious and careworn, and understood how his chivalrous spirit flinched when Margaret, in spite of pathetic efforts at self-control, complained again and again of the hardness of her lot, and spoke of the ease which was her due. Then, indeed, the mother's heart went out to George in love and pity too deep for words.

George Carey called into review these long years of sorrow and adversity which followed Mrs. Carey's dismissal from the school. She acted as scape-goat for the Lady Principal and Margaret's maiden aunt, when Colonel Tuck's wrath was poured out.

For twelve years the struggle continued. George remembered full well, that it was his mother who helped him to conceal from Margaret the fact that his employer had failed, and that a long wait was necessary before another opening could be found. When the first-born was snatched away by fever, it was she who taught both mother and father to bow their heads under their sorrow and to walk straight on. When Margaret's family showed themselves at length conciliatory, it was through old Mrs. Carey's influence that George was induced to accept the offered courtesies, while firmly refusing to 'be advanced' by material gifts.

'The change came just ten years ago,' thought George; 'it seems much longer.'

Did it seem longer, too, to Margaret, who sat by his side? Did she still remember the exquisite pleasure which the romance of the situation gave her? She was such a tired

young thing at the time, for she had never been able to attune her spirit to the drudgeries enforced on a poor man's wife ; and a permanent state of jar soon wears out body and soul. How keenly she had wished that her ten-year-old daughter could appreciate the sentiment of which the new chapter in her young life was full, and could sympathise with her mother's joy, which in its intensity was almost sufficient to obliterate the pain of past years. But Margaret had to seek sympathy elsewhere, for little Joan was not old enough to be told much of the delightful story, even though it all centred round the virtues of her hero father. For George Carey had once befriended a school-fellow when he was on the point of disgracing his own and his father's name, and had saved him from yielding to temptation, and it was upon this small incident that Margaret's happiness was founded. The school-boy, Eric Frankland, became the devoted admirer of his benefactor. He recognised George's greater moral strength, and, although it chafed him occasionally, he was glad enough to rest upon it.

Eric was several years older than George. Moreover, he belonged to a very wealthy family, and their paths in life soon separated. Eric

went to college, and subsequently was called to the Bar, where he indulged in loafing with real appreciation for the pastime. But he did not forget George Carey, and even paid occasional visits to the poor little suburban villa, and showed many small attentions to its young mistress, who was so uncommonly pretty.

Margaret remembered well the pleasurable sense of expansion which these visits caused. They seemed to the poor little woman to bring a whiff of high life into her sordid surroundings. But the visits became gradually less frequent, and many years before the romantic change in Margaret's life they had altogether ceased. Eric did not like to see good people in difficulties. The sight jarred upon his delicate susceptibilities, and made him feel ashamed of the ridiculous excess with which he indulged his own pleasures. It was better for him not to visit the suburban villa, for his visits made him feel uncomfortable and benefited nobody, since George was much too proud a man to accept any form of assistance, even from an old friend who lived under a permanent obligation to him. So George did not see his old school-fellow to congratulate him on his marriage with the beautiful and rich Miss MacGlyn, the star

of the best life in London. He never even knew whether Eric was altogether happy in that wedded life, which lasted only three years. Then Eric was left with a beautiful infant daughter and his own devices to make existence enjoyable. George had no news of Eric for five years after the young wife's death. Then one morning, as he was writing in the inner office of the small mercantile establishment of which he was confidential manager, he heard Eric's voice asking if he might see Mr. Carey for a few moments on important business. Every detail of the interview which followed was vividly impressed on the mind of George Carey, and as he sat by the cedars on this sultry afternoon he recalled them one by one as if they were described and illustrated on the special edition of the *Globe* which he still held in his hand.

* * * * *

He saw himself a young man again, rising to his feet and holding out both hands to welcome his old friend. He looked into Eric's face, and his hands fell to his sides ; he sat down by his desk and put a chair for his visitor.

'Sit down, old man!' he said.

Eric's appearance told a sad story in un-

mistakable characters. It told of dissipation and despair.

‘I needn’t explain, need I?’ said Eric, leaning forward, his thin face painfully eager, his hands nervously clutching the arms of his chair.

‘No, no, man! just tell me what I can do for you,’ said George, gently enough, but with a kind of restraint in his voice as if he would fain conceal some feeling which might offend his visitor.

‘Well, listen to me, George, old friend! I’m going right away to the other side—Australia, New Zealand, or somewhere of that sort. I’m going to start fresh.’ He stopped and coughed nervously; then he bent his legs under his chair, and pressed his toes into the ground as if to give him strength to continue. ‘I’m leaving some things behind—a house in Hampshire, near Southampton, which belongs to me, and money besides, to keep it up. I’ve always been successful with my money, and it’s a nice place. Then, I’m leaving a little girl—my daughter.’

He stopped altogether.

‘Well, old man, I wish you luck,’ said George, with something of the old bright smile

on his face, the smile which had encouraged Eric long ago.

‘I don’t want *luck*!’ said Eric, grinding his teeth. ‘I want you to take over my things—that’s all!’ Then he rose to his feet and stared at the office wall, without noticing the charts with which it was decorated.

George Carey put his hand on Eric’s shoulder.

‘Why do you want this, Frankland?’ he asked in a manner which demanded a straight reply.

‘Because she’s a cripple. She was in an accident a few months back, and will never walk again. She’s a beautiful child, and—and—as good as they make ’em, and she’s got to stop good—that’s all!’

He spoke these words with fierce defiance, as if he were resenting contradiction.

‘Well?’ asked young Carey again.

‘Well, can’t you *see*, man?’ Eric turned savagely upon him. ‘Women have got to be good. They can’t get any fun out of life any other way, and particularly Millicent, for she’s a cripple. She’d never be good with me as father. So she has got to have you instead.’

‘But you might——’

‘Ruin her! Of course I might, quick enough!’ interrupted Eric, with a hoarse laugh; ‘but I am not going to try—so there! I’m not going to live with her and see her suffering, and let her pain work on me, till I leave off caring a fig for her or myself, or anything, and just drag her to damnation along with me at double-quick pace.’

Eric was speaking noisily, having worked himself up into a senseless rage. George Carey passed him and opened the office door.

‘You can go to lunch,’ he called to the three men without. ‘I’ll see to the post.’

Then he returned and looked pityingly at the man who was standing in front of him, with trembling lips and eyes full of tears. The rage had passed, but Eric’s present mood was far more objectionable.

‘Forgive me, George,’ he whimpered; ‘I’ve been a bit hasty.’

George bit his lip. He, too, had a temper, and the whimpering made his blood boil, and he bit his lip to cool it.

‘Look here, George,’ pleaded Eric Frankland, ‘take this place in Hampshire and make it your home. Let Millicent live with you, and see that she is happy. She will never give you

trouble ; she is rich, and has no family—only a brute of a father who means to kick his heels for a few years on the other side of the world, and will never trouble you or anybody else with his hateful existence. Your wife'—George started—'your wife will soon become awfully fond of Millicent, and she will have a much more comfortable time if she lives in Hampshire than you with all your work have been able to give her.'

'My wife has nothing to complain of, thank you, Frankland.'

'Oh, all right ! you need not lose your temper so quickly. I won't interfere with your precious pride.' Then he added very softly : 'I don't offer you a bribe, Carey. I ask you to do me a favour. You once tried to give me a chance, and I am sorry you troubled, for I was not worth it. Millicent is different. You can do what you can for her, and never do too much.'

George Carey examined his boots for a few moments. He was deep in thought, and did not seem to notice Eric as he fidgeted about the room. At last he looked up.

'Very well, Frankland,' he said, 'I'll consult my wife.'

‘You can’t promise now?’ asked Eric anxiously.

‘Not yet. There are many things to consider. I could not live on your money, Frankland, however generous you may be with it. As a matter of fact, however, I know I could get transferred to the Southampton branch of this business, where the manager is leaving.’

‘Then what have you to consider?’ asked Eric impatiently.

‘Many things. You know that I have a little daughter eight years old, too, and——’

‘And beautiful?’ asked Eric, in real anxiety.

‘Well, I don’t know,’ said George, with a shadow of a smile, as Joan’s mop of bright red hair flashed before his vision and roused his sense of truth. ‘She’s a little brick, anyhow!’

‘When will you give me your answer?’

‘To-day week, if you like to come here.’

George helped his visitor to find his hat, and took him through the outer office. He watched Eric walk down the street and then get into a hansom and drive away. Then he returned to his desk, but not to work, for he had ‘many things to consider.’

* * * * *

The Careys moved in due course from their suburban villa to the beautiful country house in Hampshire, and little Millicent Frankland came to live with them, and to be Joan's companion. Every month George Carey received two substantial cheques from a London bank, the one for maintenance of the estate, the other for the education of Millicent; but no message came from the owner and father who had gone to 'kick his heels on the other side of the world.'

* * * * *

George felt to-day a tug at his heart as he recalled the death of his mother, which followed so soon after the happy days had dawned. Indeed, old Mrs. Carey only waited long enough to see the family happily established in their new and comfortable home, to note how the shade of anxiety lifted from her beloved son's face, and to hear Margaret's bright laughter and songs echo all over the house. She merely had time to pet the beautiful little fairy who had brought her children so much joy. Then, with a smile in her eyes and a prayer of thankfulness on her lips, she passed away to be at rest.

* * * * *

'It's curious,' said Margaret suddenly to her husband—and her remark did not seem

irrelevant ; it fitted in exactly with the train of his thoughts—‘that Millicent has not been spoiled.’

‘Yes, we would have done it if we could. From the first hour that she came to the place we let her focus all our plans. But she is too sweet and unselfish to be spoiled. Poor Eric’s wish has been realized ; she is very good.’

‘By far the most wonderful part of the whole thing is that Joan was never jealous ; I should have been, I know.’

‘Millicent fascinated her along with the rest of us. Joan loved her pretty ways and pitied her suffering. Do you remember that first day when Millicent was pushed in her invalid chair under that shady tree over there, and Joan was brought up to be introduced, and how, after a few moments of shy wonder, Joan placed her hand on Millicent’s white silk sleeve, and, opening her blue eyes, solemnly asked :

‘And can you never, never walk?’

‘Yes, I remember,’ said Margaret, smiling. ‘Then you dragged me away, and said the children must be left to themselves if we wanted them to be friends. I should have liked to have heard the rest of that conversation.’

Margaret and George relapsed into silence,

but the birds over Margaret's head burst with one accord into song. Perhaps they had been present on that summer day ten years ago, at that first meeting of Millicent and Joan. Perhaps they knew the story of the girls' friendship, and were telling it for the edification of the mortals who were not wise enough to understand their language of song. Perhaps the birds knew how a peal of laughter, the most beautiful laughter that Joan had ever heard, awoke the stillness of that summer day.

* * * * *

Then Millicent said :

'They tell me that your name is Joan. It's a pretty name. Don't look so grave, Joan. I can't walk, but I can do lots of other things ; I can embroider, and, and——'

Then followed a list of splendid accomplishments, and the big blue eyes became a little bigger before the recital was finished.

Then Joan told Millicent what she could do, and the little invalid heard for the first time a great deal about climbing trees, and fishing, and boating escapades. After the children had told one another all the wonderful experiences of their short lives, they made plans for the future. It was here that Joan took the lead,

and Millicent clapped her hands with delight as she anticipated the pleasure of all the games they would have together. What matter that this little girl's hair was an ugly red and rather untidy? What matter that her frock was of very rough serge and dreadfully short? What matter that her face was covered with freckles? Millicent was sure that there could not be another little girl as delightful as Joan on the face of the earth. The birds told how the friendship, begun on that summer afternoon, with only the trees and daisies and birds as witnesses, grew as the children grew, and became year by year deeper and more full of beautiful possibilities. Joan was much quicker at lessons than Millicent, and helped her to get on. But she was very untidy and awkward with her fingers, and because she was strong and well, and was therefore expected to do a great deal, she seemed to have many more scoldings. But when Joan was in disgrace Millicent suffered quite as much as her friend, and her sweet efforts at consolation were very delightful to Joan.

So through their bright and joyous childhood the girls' friendship was the foundation on which the happiness of the home was firmly established.

Gradually the young lives intertwined and clung round the hearts of everybody who came in contact with them. They all recognised Joan's strength, and rested on it confidently ; they all recognised Millicent's gentleness and charm, and rejoiced in them.

So the years passed on in uneventful happiness.

* * * *

After a short silence, broken only by the birds' recital, Margaret said :

'And she can walk now like other children.'

George Cary threw down his paper and took his wife's hand.

'Yes, my dear ; our cup is very full, is it not ?'

Margaret nestled up close to her husband.

'Hush ! you must not say that. It makes me nervous ; I don't know why. Do you know that I really thought you were making fun of me that day you came back from London with the story of that wonderful operation ?'

'I should not be such a monster.'

'But things so seldom happen which are much, much too good to be true,' said Margaret, whose speech often became confused under great excitement. 'George, do you know, if Dr.—I always forget his name—had not looked *quite*

so pompous this afternoon I should have hugged him.'

'I always thought, my dear, that there must be some justification for the exaggerated professional manner of our tip-top men.'

'Oh, I am sure he would have liked it; but he frightened me.'

George laughed.

'Come, my dear, it is getting damp. Let's go in and sit in the drawing-room.'

After dinner on that same evening Joan sat with her father and mother next to the bed on which Millicent was dozing. The nurse had signed to them that they should not speak. The shaded light of a reading-lamp fell on Millicent's head and caused the golden hair to glow. There was a slight flush on her delicate face, and a slender white hand lay in a graceful curve on the sheet. Millicent was beautiful indeed. Something made Margaret Carey look up suddenly, and her eyes fell on her daughter Joan.

She was sitting in an ungraceful attitude, with her elbow on her knee and her chin on her hand, and gazing in rapt attention at the beautiful sleeper. Her eyes were full of love. A sharp something smote the mother's heart, and made

her cheeks tingle painfully with the blood which rushed to them. Agitating thoughts chased each other feverishly through Margaret's head, and gave acute pain, even though she tried so hard to stifle them. If Millicent became strong again, if she could go about like other girls, if, with all her grace, beauty and wealth, she went into society and became as well known as her mother had been before her, what should Joan do?

Margaret was passionately devoted to her child. She admired her strong, loving, unselfish nature, and was proud of her quick intelligence and her artistic talents. But what was the use of all these? Would people take the trouble to discover Joan's qualities when they could feast their eyes on Millicent's beauty. Why had God not given her a beautiful daughter, as well as that other woman who had died so long ago?

The boy had been beautiful, but he had been taken away in his infancy. Why was Margaret's fate so cruel? Of course she loved Millicent tenderly too, but, but—Margaret Carey probed the depths of her mother-love and saw jealousy lying at the very roots.

She rose and left the room. Joan saw that something was wrong with her mother, and

followed her immediately to try to comfort her. Having closed the door silently, she ran down the passage after the retreating figure.

‘Anything the matter, mother?’ she asked anxiously.

‘No, dear; but it’s been a tiring day, and I think I’d better go to bed,’ said Mrs. Carey wearily.

‘Are you not well, dear?’

‘Yes, child, quite well; but I’m tired, that’s all—only tired. Don’t worry. Good-night, dear.’

She kissed Joan lightly on the forehead, and passing into her room, closed the door.

Joan stood still and considered for a few moments. Then she gave a low whistle, which evidently meant that she accepted her dismissal. Then she turned round, and went back to wait outside Millicent’s room for her father.

The mystery of her mother’s manner troubled her a little, but it was a mystery which she could not solve on that night or even during the months of anxious questioning which followed it.



CHAPTER II

Six months later Joan found herself at a large London dance, sitting alone on a small couch looking at the dancing couples as they hurried past her. Her mind was filled with one image, and could not recognise or classify other impressions. That image represented Millicent Frankland.

Suddenly a voice by her side made her start and colour with surprise.

It was the voice of the young Radical who had tried in vain at the last election to be returned to Parliament as representative of one of the Hampshire divisions.

‘You here, Miss Joan? I am surprised!’ he said, taking a seat by her side.

‘Why so surprised, Mr. Ellis?’ asked the girl, fixing her clear blue eyes on the man’s face — eyes which always required a direct answer.

Mr. Ellis was dark, with heavy jaws and firm lips, which set themselves into a contemptuous expression. The depth of his forehead gave his face an appearance of keen intellectuality, and a considerable fire seemed to glow in his heavy dark eyes. Richard Ellis was one of those people whose minds never seem to be at rest. He was eternally evolving schemes for the benefit of his fellow-men, and perhaps his contemptuous expression indicated that he expected his efforts to be frustrated by human stupidity. Joan, in her moments of enthusiasm, thought that people were very harsh in criticising the dogmatic and combative manner of the young politician, and was often teased at home for her staunch championship. She was always indignant with those who could only recognise earnestness in workers if it was highly polished and gilded.

‘I never thought you would leave Hampshire to come up to this sort of thing,’ said Ellis.

‘We came up for Millicent—Father’s ward. She is out now, and ought to enjoy herself. But why are *you* here, Mr. Ellis? This entertainment is certainly not in your line, either.’

‘It amuses me to see them,’ said Ellis, with

a very slight wave of his hand and a hardly perceptible smile.

‘Poor things!’ said Joan, laughing.

‘Who?’

‘The people who amuse you. If they knew that you were here to study them and were preparing to put them in speeches the dancing and fun would be checked.’

His eyes smiled.

‘I wish I could believe it, Miss Joan; but I am not exactly an alarming person yet, you know, and my thunder can rumble away without disturbing anybody’s peace of mind.’

‘But you *are* getting on. Father read us a whole paragraph about you the other day from the paper. They said such *nice* things about you, called you an expert on the temperance question, and said that no wise Minister could do without your advice. I felt so proud.’

‘Why?’ asked Richard Ellis, with extreme suddenness.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ answered Joan in great embarrassment; and she spoke truthfully.

‘You must not think Ministers’ opinions so very important,’ he went on, apparently not noticing her confusion. ‘The poor men are so harassed by representatives of conflicting

interests that they take refuge occasionally with experts who represent their own individual opinions. They listen to these people, and their nerves become steadier and their brains less confused. Then they go back to give their attention to the men who are afraid of change, excepting on the lines shaped by themselves. There are so many of these men, and consequently so many lines, that the poor Ministers soon become confused again, and the experts' soothing influence is at an end.'

'When you speak like that I can't help wondering that things ever get done at all. If you are right about the Ministers, then how is it they ever have the courage to act?'

'They seldom do; but if you really want explanations, we must take the Ministers one by one, and explain how their clockwork is occasionally wound up. But first tell me if the Millicent you mentioned just now is not the pretty invalid whom I saw at your father's house.'

'Invalid no longer, Mr. Ellis. She had a wonderful operation six months ago, and is as active as anybody now. Look at her!'

Millicent was coming towards them on the arm of a tall man with good features and a sallow complexion. She was looking radiantly

happy, and her white dress set off excellently her golden hair. Her cheeks were slightly flushed after her exercise.

‘That’s she in very truth ; what a change !’ said Ellis, admiring, almost in spite of himself. ‘She’s with that idiot Harold French, isn’t she ?’

Joan had no time to reply, for Millicent and Harold had reached her seat, and she rose to speak to them.

‘Are you enjoying it, Joan ? It’s just the loveliest dance I’ve ever been at. Heavenly floor, and band, and—*have* you seen the rose-room ? It’s a dream. You don’t want to go yet, do you, dear ? I’ve promised just this one more to Harold, and—and—come along ; we’d better not waste the music.’

Joan had spoken not a word, but her face was full of loving sympathy as she feasted her eyes on her friend’s beauty. Millicent was satisfied that all was right with Joan. Harold, who perhaps understood Joan less well, said to her laughingly :

‘It’s a comfort that she does not expect you to answer all her questions, Joan. She does not even give herself time to breathe between them.’

‘Oh, come on, you silly, prosy old thing !’

My feet will go mad if you are so slow ; the dance is half-finished.'

'All right, Miss Impatience—all right !' Then he added in a more serious tone, as he whirled his fair partner round to the valse tune : 'That was Richard Ellis, the temperance man, standing near Joan. Did you see him ?'

'No ; but I am not sure that I know him.'

'He turned round, like the boor he is, just as we came up. So he saved me the trouble of shaking hands. I'm sorry that Joan is troubled by him. I expect that she is having to listen to all sorts of wearisome and unedifying theories.'

'Poor old Joan ! She simply hates these functions. But she always wants to stop, as she likes me to enjoy myself. It's awful to be so spoiled, isn't it, Harold ?'

'It seems to agree with you,' he said unsympathetically.

'Now you're horrid ; and *you* can't talk. Everybody knows how your mother spoils you.'

'I didn't talk, Miss Millicent.'

'But you *meant* things—that's worse. You think me a hard, selfish horror, but you're too polite to say so.'

‘Come and have an ice,’ he said ; ‘the music is just over.’

‘Do I want *soothing*?’

‘Obviously! Your imagination seems on fire, and you are pretending to be offended by my most innocent and commonplace remarks.’

‘I’m not really offended,’ she said, as they followed a long stream of people into the refreshment-room. Then she added, in a conciliatory tone, as if she were trying to defend herself against some accusation : ‘I don’t mean to be selfish ; but I think Joan would like dances if she had more partners and got on better.’

‘She’s too real for this atmosphere,’ said Harold French, ‘and she won’t allow herself to be affected by it as the rest of us do. She stands up and fights it ; we open our mouths to laugh, and chat, and breathe it unconsciously, and are quite happy. She is miserably strenuous the whole night through.’

‘She’s too good for dances,’ said Millicent, ‘and men don’t understand her.’

‘They are afraid of her earnestness, and think she wants to improve them. The idea is revolting to them. I suppose the Careys would not let you come without her.’

‘I don’t know about uncle, but auntie——’

Millicent interrupted a little sigh with a spoonful of ice-cream.

‘Well, I’d rather see Joan sitting alone, although it seems a ridiculous shame and must bore her dreadfully, than know that her head is being crammed with that theorist’s stuff.’

‘I believe you are jealous, Harold, and just because you don’t agree with Mr. Ellis, you call him names. I’m shocked!’

Harold looked into her eyes with cool amusement. ‘If you look like that when you are shocked, I’ll think of some more names for Ellis.’

‘Take me into the drawing-room, please,’ said Millicent, with a little pout.

‘Will you promise me supper?’

‘No!’

‘Which of the extras will you give me?’

‘My dance, Miss Frankland.’

Millicent shot a mocking glance at Harold as she accepted the proffered arm of a dancing man in immaculate clothes, and with fair curling hair and moustache.

‘I’ve taken the first two extras,’ whispered Harold, unabashed.

Then he followed Millicent and her partner slowly upstairs. He meant to try to rescue Joan.

Joan was still on the same seat, and seemed to be arguing in desperate earnestness with Richard Ellis. He was resting his head against the wall, and was evidently trying to instruct his partner, but was not exerting himself excessively.

Harold turned on his heel, meditating angrily that it was horribly bad form for a girl to discuss 'questions' at a dance.

Suddenly he almost ran up against Mr. and Mrs. George Carey.

'Hullo, Harold, good-evening! I don't often see you looking so solemn, my boy.'

'I didn't see you, sir.'

'No, that accounts for it. Mrs. Carey and I have dropped in after a dinner-party to fetch the girls. Do you happen to know where they are?'

'Not ready to come, I am sure. Millicent is dancing away as if her life depended on her exertions, and has promised me the first two extras. Joan is sitting over there near the wall, discussing the affairs of the State with Mr. Richard Ellis.'

George Carey laughed.

'Poor little Joan!' he said.

'So I think, sir.'

‘I don’t know why Joan will persist in bothering her head about questions,’ said Mrs. Carey petulantly. ‘I never did at her age. She can’t possibly understand Mr. Ellis’s conversation. Nobody does. George, let’s find her.’

‘Oh, let her be, Margaret, if it amuses her. Millicent won’t be ready yet awhile. You’d better let Mr. French give you some refreshments.’

‘Yes, Mrs. Carey, do let me ; you must be tired,’ urged Harold. And Mrs. Carey allowed herself to be persuaded ; but as she passed her husband she said in a fierce whisper :

‘Go to her, George, at once.’

That evening, as they drove home, Millicent chatted gaily with Mr. Carey. Joan knew that her mother was vexed with her, and was in consequence silent and unhappy.

‘Are dances so dreadfully depressing, Joan ?’ asked George Carey, as he helped his daughter to remove her cloak when they arrived at home.

‘Dances ! Joan is above such things,’ said Mrs. Carey with acidity. ‘Joan has not been *dancing* ; she has been talking “temperance” with that horrible Richard Ellis—a kind of

socialist, anarchist, or something. No *other* girl would have looked at him, but probably Joan found him *most interesting!*

'Joan finds good in everybody,' interposed Millicent sweetly. 'She isn't like other girls.'

Meanwhile, Joan was wondering why her mother's words hurt her so much. She was sure that they were not spoken in unkindness.

'Well, she ought to be like other girls if she has got to live in this world with them. She'll get herself talked about soon, and——'

'Mother, what could I do? I did not *ask* Mr. Ellis to come and sit by me.'

'Didn't you? I should have thought that was the sort of thing an original girl would do.'

'I'm not original.'

'Millicent said you were, and, of course, Millicent *always* knows.'

Millicent's face became tearful. She looked appealingly at Mr. Carey, who was shaking his foot impatiently and awaiting his opportunity to interfere and send his family to bed.

'You can't expect other men to come and dance with you, Joan, if you let Ellis monopolize your attention. Ordinary girls know how to send off a man who bores them,' continued Mrs. Carey with increasing asperity.

‘Other men did not come before. I sat a long time alone, and I was very grateful to Mr. Ellis. It is horrid sitting alone, and—and he did not bore me.’

‘Worse and worse!’ sighed Mrs. Carey.

‘It’s only because it is so difficult to get to know Joan properly that partners——’

But Millicent was rudely interrupted.

‘Really, Millicent, it’s not your business. I’m Joan’s mother, and you will be good enough to let me speak to her as I choose. You make her fifty times worse.’

‘Hush, hush, my dear! This is an absurd talk about nothing at all. I am sure Joan is quite able to protect herself against bores, and Millicent is quite right to speak up for her friend.’

‘Of course, they are both saints, and I——’

‘You are tired, my dear, and should go to bed. Come on, all of you. Good-night, Millicent. No tears, child, on that pretty face and dress. There, there! Kiss your aunt, and go upstairs. To-morrow you will all have forgotten this rubbish.’

Mr. Carey patted Millicent’s head, and tried to soothe her with much petting. He gently took her arm and led her to his wife, whom she

obediently embraced. Then he led her upstairs, carrying her cloak. Joan and her mother followed in rather a solemn procession. At the door of Millicent's bedroom they all said good-night. Mr. Carey again spoke some comforting words to Millicent. He pressed Joan's hand, but said nothing to her beyond the usual 'Good-night, my child.'

Her grief was too real to be kissed away; she knew that her father recognised and understood it.

'Good-night, Joan,' said Mrs. Carey; 'I can't see why you should look so wretched! I can't help speaking to you, and I only speak for your good.' Then she left her daughter, and went to her own room.

'Margaret, why *do* you do this sort of thing?' said George Carey, as soon as he had closed the door.

'Of course, go on at me now!' retorted his wife angrily, going up to the dressing-table and pulling the pins out of her hair with savage little tugs. 'You are as blind as a bat, and you blame me for seeing a little.'

'You see everything that you shouldn't see!'

'And you see nothing at all. Which is

better, I should like to know? Oh, I have no patience with you! Are you really too stupid to see what Millicent is doing for our child; how her beauty and charm are robbing Joan of her rights?’

‘Her *rights*, Margy? Why, you forget that Joan has only the right of friendship to bring her to town and to introduce her to London gaiety—Millicent’s friendship!’

‘Millicent again! I had rather Joan were poor and by herself than—than—a pauper—supported by Millicent’s friendship. She would not be so much injured by poverty as she is now by friendship with a girl like that!’

‘Margaret! remember our trust—remember your love for Millicent six months ago, and your love *now*!’

‘Love! I tell you I hate Millicent! So would you if you were a father!’

‘Good-night, my dear! We will discuss this to-morrow, when you are more reasonable.’

‘I don’t want to discuss, I tell you——’

But her remaining words were lost on George, for he closed the door of his dressing-room. Margaret glanced at her red, angry face in the glass as she began to unfasten her dress. Her fingers worked nervously, as if they would accomplish

some difficult task if they only had the necessary direction. Margaret would gladly have torn out of her heart the hideous passion which had taken root there, and which was distorting her love for Joan and for her ward. The poor little woman longed to do her duty towards both girls, but the strange jealousy which had followed her exaltation in Millicent's recovery had grown day by day, and now absorbed her being. It forced her to commit in word and act one absurdity after another. It sapped her moral strength till she had no power of resistance; yet she was conscious of the injustice of its dominion, and the misery which it was bringing into the home she loved. She sank on to a chair, her arms falling wearily to her sides, and wept bitterly.

Her tears were the expression of her impotency, and of her subjugation.

Meanwhile Joan was facing her problem squarely, as was her habit. She was talking to herself aloud.

'You are plain—perhaps ugly. Millicent is beautiful. People take notice of Millicent, and they don't care a bit about you. All this does not concern you, but your mother is fretting dreadfully. Every time she sees you together

she thinks that Millicent will get married, and be happy, and in a good position, and all that sort of thing, and that you will be a poor old maid, with your palette and easel and brush and tabby. You don't mind, but she minds dreadfully, because she thinks that you will be miserable. Do you hear that, Joan Carey? *That's* her reason for minding. And it's no use your talking about being quite happy with your painting. She does not believe you. She would never have been happy without father, and she thinks you need a husband, too. "Likely people" want Millicent. They don't want you, you ugly, stupid old thing!" (The tone of these last words was full of tenderness. Joan was at that moment really sorry for her disadvantages.) 'Of course, if you had made the world, Joan Carey, you would have arranged it differently; you would have given the rich girl plain looks and the poor girl beauty, and weighed each one when she was complete, after the manner of a grocer's assistant, who makes up his packages. But somehow you were not asked to make the world. God did it all alone, and said He did it well. So you've got to be satisfied. But what can you do about your mother to save her from fretting? She is ill

and miserable, and irritable to everybody who comes near her. Well, you're very wise, but you must let her be, because you can't do anything at all for her. You can't alter your face or your stupid ways. So you must live on, and see what happens. It's no use kicking and making a fuss; it's no use—it's no use!

Then the tired girl ceased to admonish herself, but laid her face in her hands and sobbed bitterly. If there had been any use in fighting her spirit would have been brave enough for the effort. But effort was useless. She must go on, and so must *everything*, for the circumstances of her life were beyond her control. So Joan wept bitterly.

After a while, she rose from the side of the bed where she had been crouching, blew out the candle, and got into bed. She pressed her toes hard against the foot of the bed, as if she would thus squeeze back her tears or squeeze out a solution to her misery.

After tossing about for some time, she fell asleep. In the next room Millicent had been dreaming happy dreams for over an hour. Her sleep was peaceful, for in saying good-night Joan had told her that everything was right in the home, and there was no cause to fret.

CHAPTER III

THE next morning, after a very late breakfast, Mrs. Carey was standing by the bow-window in her dining-room, when she saw Harold French ride up on his bicycle. She went out to greet him in the hall.

‘Come in, Harold—come in!’

‘It’s a monstrous time to call, Mrs. Carey, but I wanted to see how you all were after last night. It *was* a late dance. How is Millicent?’

‘I have not seen Millicent yet this morning, but I have no doubt she is well. She is always late after a dance. She is anxious about her complexion.’

Mrs. Carey suppressed a smile which was not altogether charming.

‘That seems an easy enough tip; I wonder more girls in London do not try it,’ said Harold, much too pleased with himself to notice any reserve in Mrs. Carey’s manner. ‘And Joan?’

Who had the best of it last night, she or Richard Ellis ?

'I did not ask Joan, but I don't suppose she would have told me if I had. She knows that questions, with a big Q, bore me intolerably.'

'That's just how I feel,' said Harold French emphatically. 'I call these platform speakers theorists, and nothing more. What does Richard Ellis know about intemperance, I should like to know? He is a fellow with dull tastes. He doesn't want pleasures and excitements like the poor devils he preaches to. I expect he leads a humdrum, respectable existence' (this spoken with unutterable scorn), 'with a careful managing mother, who brushes his clothes for him, washes his shirts, takes the earnings he gets from his pie-dish factory, and gives him pocket-money. If a fellow like Ellis wants to drink, he drinks water as a rule, and ginger-beer on festive occasions. Then somebody tells him to stand for Parliament in the Radical interest, somebody with a crank on temperance who can't stand himself, as he can't speak. So he pays Ellis's expenses, and Ellis struts about like a young peacock on a balcony and talks about local option. Ugh! It's all humbug!'

At that moment Joan put her head into the room. Her eyes were full of mischievous laughter.

'Gracious, Harold! What an oration! You must be tired! No, I was not eavesdropping,' she added, coming further into the room. 'The door was wide open when I passed, and I heard words, words, words. I *had* to wait till the flow was over before I could come in to say good-morning. It would have been such a waste to interrupt.'

'You've got your studio apron on!' said Mrs. Carey in a tone of annoyance.

'Yes, I am afraid I have mother, and it's rather full of dabs, too. But I dare say Harold will say good-morning all the same.'

'Going to have a busy morning, Joan?' Harold asked, as he took her hand.

'Well, I feel like work, but I am not sure if that's a good sign. I prefer my energy to make itself felt when I have my brush in my hand. If it starts strongly before, it sometimes evaporates before I touch my canvas. Now, Harold, do start talking again. I like to hear you when you are on your high horse.'

'I was talking about Richard Ellis.'

‘So I guessed ; but you really don’t know much about his home-life, do you ?’

He saw that she was still laughing at him.

‘I don’t expect that I know as much as you do, Joan, because I have not talked to him as you have.’

Mrs. Carey winced.

‘No ; and though I *have* talked to him so much, I could not give you any idea of his home-life. He never mentions it. But I should not *think*—no I should not think—it was very much as you describe.’

Harold looked annoyed.

‘I was only picturing the probable life of a theorist. You must admit that Ellis is nothing else. You can fill in the details of his life for yourself.’

‘I don’t know why I should be so sure that Mr. Ellis is insincere. He always *seems* in earnest ; why shouldn’t he be ?’

‘A man who is in earnest does not ride a hobby to get into Parliament. He wants votes, does your friend Ellis. When men are really keen on their principles, they don’t parade them on every platform. Now, you won’t hear me talk temperance, but you will never see me *do* anything to promote the drink curse. I wouldn’t

make a farthing out of the liquor traffic even if I had the chance, and I wouldn't——'

'What?' asked Joan, half amused and half pleased by Harold's unwonted earnestness.

'I don't think Mrs. Carey approves of this sort of conversation, so we had better stop.'

'What were you going to tell us? I am sure I shan't object to anything you say, Harold,' said Mrs. Carey kindly.

'That I'd never marry a woman whose blood was touched by the drink taint, were she an Earl's daughter.'

Joan laughed.

'If Mr. Ellis had said that, you would have abused him for cant. You don't often come across drunkards' relations in polite society, Harold, so your solemn resolutions would seem a trifle superfluous.'

'I don't know so much about that.'

'Nor do I,' said Mrs. Carey.

Joan looked at her mother; there was a strange ring in her voice. Margaret rose, and went to the mantelpiece to arrange a plant. Harold remarked that it must be getting late, and he must be off to his chambers. As he said good-bye, he apologized for having talked 'so much rot.'

‘I’m glad he has gone,’ said Joan, as soon as the street-door was closed.

‘You don’t like his remarks about your new friend?’

‘I don’t like his heroics about himself—and drunkards’ relatives.’

Mrs. Carey eyed her daughter curiously.

‘Then, in your omniscience, you don’t consider that Harold is the sort of man to carry out his principles, if they are ever irksome to him.’

‘I don’t know about that. All I say is that he has no right to pose as a hero, even to us, because he thinks he can resist temptations which can never come into his life.’

Mrs. Carey made a quick step forward. Some words sprang to the tip of her tongue and settled there. She turned again to the mantelpiece.

‘It’s a difficult thing, Joan, to decide what other people’s temptations are likely to be.’

Joan looked surprised. Her mother seldom moralized in so charitable a vein.

‘Are you going to paint, Joan?’ asked Mrs. Carey. ‘The studio is one of the things you are still keen about, isn’t it?’

Joan left the room. As she went upstairs she clenched her teeth, as if to help her to

bear the pain of the thrust conveyed in her mother's parting words. Upstairs in her attic Joan spent some time before she commenced her work. She pushed her fingers into her coarse red hair, and placed herself in the curiously ungraceful attitude which her studio walls knew so well, but which would have been ill-appreciated by the world outside. She said to herself :

'You'd give something to know what is in your mother's mind, wouldn't you, Joan Carey? But you just can't.'

At length Joan drew a canvas from the wall against which it had been resting, and placed it on the easel in front of her. This canvas was intended for a portrait of Millicent, but a faint outline had only so far been sketched. Joan looked at it critically for some time, and her face screwed itself into several contortions, but she seemed disinclined to work.

There was a light knock at the door, and immediately after Millicent came in. She was looking radiant in a print dress.

'Good-morning, dearest,' she said, as she gave Joan an affectionate kiss. 'Well, where shall I sit? I'm a perfect angel, you'll admit. I got up early—at ten o'clock—in spite of

being dreadfully tired, and I am ready to sit for you right up to dinner-time, if you promise, promise *solemnly*, that you'll make the background blue.'

Joan gazed at her admiringly.

'If your highness will be graciously seated,' she said, 'I will consider the question of background.'

Millicent threw herself on to the model's couch, which was fitted up with cushions, at the far end of the room.

'Don't begin for a minute, Joan,' she said; 'I want to talk.'

Joan lifted up her hands in well-feigned disgust.

'Look here, Joan,' continued Millicent, unabashed; 'Harold's been here, hasn't he?'

'Yes. He talked a lot of stuff.'

'About what?'

'About Mr. Ellis and temperance.'

'Poor Joan! Did he ask after me?'

'I believe so.'

'Well, Joan, you had better start. You are not in the mood for talk, and so you may as well paint. Come here and put me straight.'

Joan got up from her stool obediently, and went up to Millicent. Then she sat down

next to her friend and placed her arm round her.

‘Millicent,’ she said, looking straight into the beautiful eyes in front of her, ‘do you care for him, girlie?’

‘For whom? Oh, you dear, silly old darling!’

Millicent’s arms were round Joan now, and she tried to hide her face in the other’s shoulder. Joan patted her fair hair.

‘I understand, Millicent.’

‘You’re a witch!’ said Millicent, springing to her feet and standing opposite the artist, her eyes dancing with fun. ‘There is nothing to understand. Go and paint, Joan! I believe you are lazy to-day—actually lazy!’

‘I can’t paint you to-day, girlie. I don’t feel like it. I’m queer.’

‘You don’t feel well. It was the dance. Oh, Joan, I am so sorry!’

‘Yes, girlie, I’m well enough, but I don’t feel *good* and peaceful enough to paint you.’

‘Well, I’m fidgety, too. I expect there is something in the air which makes us feel queer. But I don’t see why you shouldn’t paint, all the same.’

‘I could paint some people, but not *you*. So,

'sweetheart, go and take a walk. I know you have something to do out of doors.'

'You *are* a witch, Joan!'

'No, dear; but you tell me things even though you don't speak.'

Millicent put her pretty little hand over her friend's mouth.

'Hush, hush, Joan! you make me afraid!'

'Well, I wouldn't do that for worlds,' said Joan, laughing. 'Was I right, then? You *do* want something out of doors?'

'I *do* and I don't. Harold is going up for that dull law exam. He said he ought to read a certain book, but it was such dreary, dusty stuff that he had not the courage to grapple with it. He screwed himself up to go to the library and ask for it, and thought his virtue was rewarded when he heard that it was out. I said he ought to buy it, if it was important. He said I ought to give it to him. I told him that he was impertinent and lazy, and we had a dreadful quarrel.'

'Was this at the end of the dance?'

Millicent nodded her head sagaciously.

'That was why he came this morning, I expect. He must have been annoyed when he didn't see me. But he *said* he wouldn't make

another effort, and that if he failed in his exam it would be all my fault. He didn't care about his success, as I didn't. He said he'd be a failure all his life, and—Joan, I don't want him to be a failure.' She came close to her friend, and spoke very gravely. 'I think he is often, *very* often, very careless, and—and unprincipled; but—I don't want him to be a failure.'

Joan almost choked through trying not to laugh.

'Well, what are you going to do, Millicent?'

'Order the book for him, of course; but I shan't tell him it comes from me.'

'*Of course* not,' said Joan.

'I think he will feel encouraged when he gets the book,' continued Millicent thoughtfully, 'and he won't fall into these horrid slack ways which some men have, and I do dislike them so. Now, good-bye, Joan, as you don't want me.'

So Millicent hurried out of the room, happy in the thought that she was saving Harold from moral collapse. And Joan watched her idly from her window, when, about a quarter of an hour later, she tripped across the square on her way to the book-shop. Joan had tried again to paint, and had again failed. She did not

understand herself to-day. There was a restless feeling in her heart, a longing for sympathy, a desire for action. Ever since she was quite a child, painting had been Joan's particular delight. It was in her art that she found expression for the energy which seemed superfluous in her everyday life. She had some talent, but little training, for Millicent could not paint, and Joan's education had to be regulated by her friend's needs, for it was from Millicent's allowance that the teachers' salaries were drawn. But Joan was quite content with her limited opportunities for study. It was enough for her that she could put her feelings into her art, and hitherto her painting had justified her confidence by giving her peace. Indeed, until six months ago, her life had been simple, straightforward, and delightful. If she felt any restlessness, it was only caused by the natural buoyancy of awakening womanhood; if she had the pain of unsatisfied longing, it was only because, like other girls, she was impatient to anticipate her strength, and to reveal a capacity which was not yet mature. In these moods Joan had hitherto only had to concentrate her mind on her art, and her aspirations, from being struggling and diffused, had become

focussed on creation, and had transfused joy into her being.

But all these natural cravings had disappeared during the last few months. To-day, as Joan stared listlessly out of her attic window, she experienced a strange bitterness of spirit, and a sense of mystery which shrouded her life and seemed to defy analysis. She was worried by her mother's strange manner towards Millicent. It seemed to twist itself into all the circumstances of the family life and render them entangled; it created in the home an atmosphere of irritability against which Joan was powerless to struggle. Of course, she herself was glad that Millicent and Harold cared for one another. He was the son of Mrs. Carey's most intimate friend in Hampshire, and he had been the children's playmate and companion all through their school-days. Suddenly, as Joan stared at the palings of the square below her window, her eyes became full of mist. Through the mist she saw a merry boy sitting with her on a branch of a big tree; they were planning games to amuse the pretty invalid girl who was lying on the couch below them, and calling to them not to whisper so loud lest she should lose the fun of a surprise. Then the scene in the

mist changed, and Joan saw herself standing by a lake with a fishing-rod in her hand. Next to her was a sturdy boy, pulling vigorously at a writhing mass of worms, and trying to extricate one to put on her rod. His fingers were very clumsy, and the worms slippery, and Joan was laughing heartily at his many discomfitures in his unequal contest with the living bait.

Then she saw herself, a few years older, sitting on the lawn with a Greek play on her lap. She was trying to induce a big school-boy, who was lounging on the grass by her side, to listen to the explanatory notes which she was labouring industriously to read to him. Suddenly the school-boy changed into a college student, and Joan saw herself walking by his side. But the mist grew so thick at this point that Joan could not see where they were walking, and she rubbed her eyes hard without any satisfactory result ; indeed, her fingers only got uncomfortably wet, and she had to use her handkerchief to dry them.

Of course, Joan was glad that Harold had learned to love Millicent ; she was *very* glad. *How* she would have despised him if he had not recognised her charm ! What, then, was

the matter with her? Why could she not paint as usual? Why could she not rejoice completely in her friend's joy? What was there to fret about? What did she want?

All these questions remained unanswered. Joan went to the door and opened it. She intended to go and speak to her mother about Harold and Millicent. But she closed the door and sat down to her easel again. Perhaps it was best for Joan to remain alone to think about Millicent, for her mother was so—— Joan's eyes *were* troublesome to-day. She could hardly see the outlines of her sketch, and so she must just sit idly with her hands upon her lap, wondering at the strange pain which had come into her life.



CHAPTER IV

A MONTH later George Carey was sitting in the pleasant library of his Hampshire home, leaning against his writing-table, fingering his pen, and playing with his notepaper. If he wanted to write, it was impossible to do so in the agitated atmosphere created by his wife. Margaret was sitting on the window-seat; her hands were engaged in nervously pulling at an entangled piece of string, her feet were moving impatiently, her face was white, and her eyes showed traces of recent tears. She was saying:

‘And you persist in letting him come here and spoil our child’s life! You scorn my remonstrances, my entreaties. You think me foolish to waste my breath!’

‘My dear, my dear, be reasonable! Have I ever in the past——’

‘Oh, don’t ask questions!’

He rose from his chair and went very close

to Margaret, placing his hand on her shoulder. He looked much older than his wife. His manner was that of an indulgent father towards a spoiled child.

‘Won’t you let me speak to you about the past?’ he asked gently.

‘Oh, leave me alone!’ she said, shaking herself free from his touch, and standing up to face him, her eyes flashing with anger. ‘If you want to hear about the past, you can let me speak. Perhaps *you* don’t know so much as you think. Perhaps you don’t know that I was always a little frightened of you, with your grand manner and quiet—quiet saintliness. I didn’t know why I was afraid; you were too deep for me. There was something hidden from me, which frightened me. I know now what it was.’ Her voice was hoarse with excitement. ‘Somehow you quieted my fears, but you didn’t take them away; and now—now I know I was right to be afraid.’

‘After all these years, Margy, you have discovered something? After all we have gone through together.’

His voice was so calm it maddened her. The words seemed to find difficulty in escaping. She despised him for weighing them so carefully.

‘I have discovered,’ she said angrily, ‘that what *seemed* like strength of love was nothing, only shallowness. The manner was grand, but behind the manner was mockery, not love. You despised my weakness ; you thought me a silly, frivolous woman. You think so now. Why don’t you speak ?’

He sat down again by his table.

‘Because I have no weapon with which to cross yours.’

If he had only got into a rage, if he had only bidden her be silent or be gone, or ask his forgiveness for the cruel, false words she had just flung at him, she would have experienced an agony of remorse. If he had only forced her into silence while he recalled some of the old battles, the old triumphs, the old failures, she would have thrown herself into his arms, and, resting her tired head on his shoulder, would have explained that it was only love that made her silly—love for him and love for Joan. But he merely sat silently watching her, with his quill pen in his hand.

His calm self-control infuriated her. She did not know what to say or do. Her heart was full of passion ; she seemed powerless to hurt him. After a few moments of restless move-

ment about the room, Margaret stamped her foot, and asked, as if for the first time :

‘George, why do you let Richard Ellis come here?’

‘Because he seems to like it, and, so far as I know, he has done nothing to warrant me in stopping his visits.’

‘So making love to your daughter is nothing?’

‘He has not made love.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I trust my own observations, and Joan has assured me——’

‘Your observations? The veriest baby sees more than you do. Richard Ellis might spoon about Joan all day long, but *you* would observe nothing. As to Joan herself, she does not know what love-making is—more’s the pity. When you asked her, I expect she went to look up the word in the Imperial Dictionary.’

‘Well, my dear, what is the use of talking? You think me a criminal because I do not forbid a gentleman——’

‘A gentleman, indeed!’

‘Yes, a gentleman, who lives in the neighbourhood and works very hard for its good, to visit at this house. I don’t think he has a very

bright home. I notice that he often looks rather wretched——’

‘The best platform expression!’

‘If his coming here,’ continued George Carey, not noticing the interruption, ‘gives him the least pleasure, I am not going to force him to stay away. As *you* don’t care for his society, I do not *encourage* him to come.’

‘There is no need for *your* encouragement. He comes without, or perhaps Joan——’

‘Margaret, let us leave our child out of this tiresome discussion,’ he said firmly.

‘I can’t think how you dare to call talk like this tiresome. A woman may be tiresome when she wearies her husband with housekeeping details, and talk about ribbons and furbelows; but surely she may speak about her own child’s welfare without being told that she is tiresome.’

‘You purposely misunderstand me, Margaret, and so I had far better be silent. Oh, there is Joan!’ he added, with evident relief.

The girl passed the window, waved her hand to her parents, and in another minute came rather boisterously into the room.

‘What a noise, Joan! You make the whole room shake. You have no consideration.’

‘Very sorry, mummy!’ said Joan; then she glanced from her mother to her father and prepared to leave them, for she felt in the way.

‘Have you been to the village, little woman?’ said George, taking the end of Joan’s feather boa in his hand and playing with it. He did not want her to go, and to give her mother the opportunity to play out her rôle until, perchance, the curtain fell so heavily that it might take weeks of combined effort to raise it again.

‘Yes, father; I’ve been all round.’

‘Any news, girlie?’

‘Well, there *is* just one exciting piece of news, but I will tell you about it at some other time.’

‘Perhaps it is not fit for your mother’s ears, Joan?’ asked Mrs. Carey.

‘Mummy, what is the matter? Your voice sounds so tired, and you look so pale. Tell me what it is. Father, let me know!’

She appealed first to one and then to the other.

‘There is nothing to tell, child,’ said George Carey; and, indeed, he spoke the truth.

Joan needed no telling. What daughter

does not understand when she is in the presence of that pitiable something which cuts across her parents' genuine love and sympathy for one another, and induces misery and conflict? But to save the parents' self-respect the child must feign ignorance.

'There must be something to make you both look like this. Oh, tell me, father, and let me help, or—or—kiss me!'

The child shrank from that terrible something. If her parents would kiss her, they would keep its dark shroud from her heart.

The father kissed her. The mother said:

'Don't be silly, Joan!' and pushed her from her. Temper had conquered her good sense.

'Joan, tell us this great piece of news from the village,' said Mr. Carey in as bright a voice as he could summon.

'It is not really important.'

'Is it about a scheme of Mr. Ellis's which is actually practicable?'

Joan blushed painfully.

'No,' she said; 'it is only a little piece of gossip. The people in the village are all talking about a tramp who is prowling about in the neighbourhood of this house. He seems, from all accounts, to be a fairly young man, very

broken and very wretched in appearance. He is really tall, but rather bent. He is very fair, with blue eyes, and bushy eyebrows which nearly meet each other. He was in church yesterday, and they all say that he kept his eyes fixed on Millicent from the moment she came in to the end of the service.'

'How many days has he been here?' asked George Carey.

'Three or four, they say. Is it not queer that we should not have seen him?'

'Perhaps we did, but a tramp in these parts is not, I fear, a phenomenon, and we may have seen this specimen without noticing him.'

'They say he is *not* the usual sort, and he has been so much at the Cross Roads opposite our gates that people think he must be particularly interested in *us*. Mrs. Brown, the carpenter's wife, says that her husband noticed him gazing at Millicent as she walked down the lane on Thursday afternoon with Harold, and he was there when she passed on her way home. They were out a long time—two hours, I think, for they settled everything on that walk.'

'How did Brown know that the tramp was there all the time?'

‘He was doing that special job for mother to the kitchen-garden gate.’

‘Did he speak to the tramp?’

‘He tried to, but the man wouldn’t answer. He pretended to be dumb.’

‘Why pretended?’

‘Oh, he isn’t dumb. He spoke to old Nana when she was weeding her garden on Saturday morning.’

‘What did he say to her?’

‘He asked questions. Nana thought him rather impertinent because he wanted to know so much, and his clothes were so badly patched. Nana admires old clothes if they are well patched, but she has no patience with bad sewing.’

‘I suppose she told him nothing.’

‘Oh yes, she did, though. He got round poor old Nana by saying nice things about *me*.’

‘About *you*?’

Joan nodded her head sagaciously.

‘Of course, he was really interested in Millicent.’

‘How do you know?’ asked her father sharply.

‘Because I am more cunning than Nana, and can occasionally see through people’s artfulness. He would have betrayed himself to *anybody* who

was rather less blind than Nana. *She*, of course, was delighted when she heard him rave over my hair and even my face, and she forgot his impertinence and his patches, and told him all she could about us. He spent a long time with Nana, and is now acquainted with every detail of my life. He knows when I walked, when I talked, when I had my first tooth, when I had whooping-cough, and he has learned that I am a great artist, and that even my first picture was fit for the best exhibition ever organized, and——'

'And—and—Millicent?' interrupted George Carey.

'Well, of course, he could only hear of her doings since she was eight years old. Nana tells me that the man wanted to know about Millicent's parentage, "but that she understands her dooty and held her tongue, knowing indeed so little, as you may say, that was worth the telling." She says that when he got inquisitive she sent him about his business, but I expect he learned all he wanted to learn before he really took his departure. I know that Nana told him about Millicent's operation.'

'Did she tell him about Harold?'

'I should not *think* so, but I am not sure.'

You see, when we first told Nana about the engagement we made such a fuss about its being a secret that I don't think she will ever speak about it ; she will never remember that it was only a secret for one day.'

'And where does the tramp-stranger lodge?'

'That's the queerest part. He goes off every night about ten, and does not return to the village till about nine or ten the next morning.'

'Surely our boys know where he goes!'

'They don't seem to. They started following him on the second night, but he behaved so queerly that they turned back.'

'What do you mean by "queerly" ?'

'Oh, I don't know. The people in the village are so fanciful. All sorts of talk goes about, and is believed. One old man told me that the fellow is a woman dressed up. You should have heard his wife's scorn. "Lor', John! A woman would find better trousers than those if she looked with her eyes shut," she said.'

'You did not meet him yourself, Joan?'

'No ; but, father—I—I——'

'Well?'

'I believe he was behind me when I came into the drive.'

‘Why do you think so? Did you see him?’
Joan coloured.

‘You will despise me dreadfully, father. I am a terrible coward, I know, but I couldn’t help it.’

‘Couldn’t help what?’

‘Well, as I turned the corner of the lane, I saw a ragged figure run across the piece of copse on the right. He kept in the shadow of the trees, but he reached the hedge just behind me. I heard him climb and jump heavily, and I know that he followed me, but I did not look round.’

George Carey laughed. Then, for the first time since Joan came in, he looked at his wife. Her eyes were riveted on his face, and he saw a smile about her lips which made him nervous.

‘Joan,’ he said, in a voice which was meant to be perfectly natural, ‘I forbid you to tell any of these stories to Millicent. Happily, she is spending the day with Harold’s people, and is not likely to hear them. They made you nervous and hysterical, and might perhaps affect Millicent even more.’

Joan despised nervous and hysterical people, and her father’s words annoyed her.

‘I know I was silly, father, but——’

‘We all have our lapses, my dear;’ then, ignoring the angry expression on Joan’s face, he continued : ‘Whatever this fellow is—man or woman or sprite—I must find him and speak to him. He shan’t prowl about here any longer and upset everybody——’

There was a sound on the gravel outside the window. George looked out and saw somebody jump to the ground and make off quickly down the drive.

‘What is it, father?’ asked Joan, furious with herself because her heart beat so quickly.

‘I think it is the tramp,’ said George Carey slowly ; ‘I must follow him.’

Joan clung to her father’s arm, and cried :

‘Oh, do be careful! he may be violent; he may——’

‘Want a shilling—he very likely does. Don’t be a baby, Joan! If you like I will take a big stick with me. Whatever you do don’t speak about this rubbish to Millicent.’

George Carey went out of the room, and chose a stick from the stand with some deliberation.

‘I may be gone some time, Margaret,’ he said; ‘I want to settle a few things with

the tramp, and I have given him a good start.'

Margaret followed her husband into the garden.

'George,' she said eagerly, 'if you find what you expect to find, what will you say to Harold?'

'I have already told him all that he need know,' said George impatiently.

'Indeed,' said Margaret; and their eyes met once more, and once more her smile frightened him. Mrs. Carey returned to the library. Joan was standing in the middle of the room, trembling all over.

'I couldn't help it, mummy.'

'Help what, Joan? Whatever is coming to you? You are making as much fuss about this gossip as if you were a village girl yourself. I always thought that if you *had* red hair, at least you had sense. Oh, what was I saying? I did not mean to be unkind.'

Joan's figure swayed as if she were about to faint. Mrs. Carey seized her in her arms and led her gently to the sofa. She kissed her on the forehead. All anger, all bitterness, all jealousy was gone. Her child was in trouble.

'What is it, Joan?' she asked tenderly; 'tell me, dearie.'

Joan whispered in reply :

‘I heard what you said to father—the corner window was open—I could not help it. Tell me, mother, what does it mean? What does father expect? What has Harold to do with the tramp? Everything seems so queer and awful. I am *sure* something is going to happen!’

‘Hush, dear! don’t worry yourself about nothing. I know father will be angry with me for telling you, but you are old enough to know and share our troubles now, and I can’t see you so distressed without trying to explain.’

For a moment Joan felt inclined to stop the confidence to which her father would have objected, but curiosity stifled her conscientious scruples. Also, she was glad to be considered of an age to know trouble. She could only say :

‘Thank you, mummy ; I should *like* to hear.’

‘Well, of course, you know that Millicent’s father and your father were old friends.’

‘Yes ; and he broke down in health and had to go abroad, and we have never heard from him since. Oh, mummy, you don’t think it can be that——’

Joan jumped up from the sofa and clapped her hands in her excitement. Her feeling of

faintness had entirely disappeared ; she fancied herself on the threshold of a new mystery—the mystery of romance.

‘Of course, we may be entirely wrong, but when you were describing the tramp, the thought came to both your father and myself that perhaps Eric Frankland——’

‘Oh, mummy, it would be much too beautiful for anything if we could find Millicent’s father again. Perhaps he is really our tramp, and he has gone down so much that he is ashamed to show himself to his child, but he just comes to look at her and skulks away. But she will find him out, and care for him, and lead him up again, just by loving him. He will be all that Millicent’s father should be, and Harold—why should not Harold know, mother? He has surely enough feeling to delight——’

‘Joan, don’t let your fancy carry you too far!’ said Mrs. Carey in a low voice. ‘Don’t you remember Harold’s principles with regard to the drink question? He told us he would never marry a woman whose blood was touched by the drink taint, were she an Earl’s daughter. I remember his exact words and the occasion when he said them. It was the morning after the Seeleys’ dance, and you mocked him

because you felt so *sure* temptation would never come in his way. Well, you know that it was not only bad health which broke the life of Eric Frankland ; it was not only that——'

'Mother!' screamed Joan in terror, 'you don't mean—you wouldn't surely—— Oh, mother, mother!'

Joan clenched her cheeks with her hands ; this was a curious movement to which she was addicted when she was excited. She looked at her mother and shrank away.

'Don't make a fuss, Joan,' said Mrs. Carey crossly ; 'I thought you had more sense. I am not a monster, and I don't want trouble to come to Millicent. Of course, I want her happiness as much as anybody else. She is like my own child to me, but I don't think *any* girl ought to have a perfectly smooth life, without bothers of any kind. Millicent has never experienced the least difficulty in anything she wanted to do. A passing care may give her strength. This trouble—if it does come—will pass quickly enough, and leave even greater brightness behind.'

'Mother, how *can* you talk about Millicent like this? She and Harold are so happy ;

their love is so perfect, and they trust each other completely. *You—you—would dare* to spoil everything for them !'

'Joan, please remember that you are speaking to your mother. I have no intention of injuring Millicent.'

'That's not true—you know it isn't!' cried Joan, losing entire control over her temper; 'you *want* to ruin them. You are glad that the opportunity has come. You *hate* them!'

Joan's eyes blazed. Mrs. Carey laughed nervously.

'My dear Joan,' she said weakly, 'you had better go out of the room, and come back when you know how to speak to your mother.'

'I will speak now. It's not right to be silent.'

'Then I won't hear,' said Margaret Carey, and walked hurriedly out of the room.

'Mother, mother!' called Joan in a tempest of love, sorrow, shame, and anger.

But Margaret Carey closed the door, and Joan dared not follow her because she was her mother.



CHAPTER V

JOAN lay curled up on the library sofa, her head quite hidden in the cushion, and she sobbed bitterly. This was the kind of thing she had done as a child, on those rare occasions when someone had ventured to scold her unjustly. Joan would never have cried in the face of any trouble which could be diminished by her own effort. It was when she found something evil in life which seemed to exist through no fault of hers, and which she could do nothing to remove, that she gave away to impotent misery. In the old days the unjust 'grown-ups' would occasionally insist on seeing things wrong, and on making a fuss over some fault which was only a fault in appearance. The 'grown-ups' did not *mean* to be cruel; they just made mistakes which the little red-haired girl could so easily have put right if she had been allowed to do so. Instead, she had been snubbed and had been

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obliged to run away and nestle on some friendly sofa, to tell the cushion her troubles in the language of sobs. To-day Joan was a 'grown-up' herself, but the secret of her grief was still the same. She was powerless to remove the evil which had come into her home. Those she loved were hurting one another cruelly, and she could only ask vainly, 'What were they doing it for?' Why did her mother not leave Harold alone? He loved Millicent and *must* marry her. Why make him miserable first? Joan shuddered as she remembered the scene between her mother and father which she had interrupted when she returned from her walk. They had been happy for so long; what were they doing to one another now? She must go and find her father, and tell him that her mother was unhappy and needed comfort. Then Joan remembered where her father had gone, and the tears came more quickly than ever. 'And mother is *glad*,' she thought. 'How dare she? If she wasn't my mother, I shouldn't care so much,' she whispered to the cushion in her impotence. Then she jumped up impetuously, and crying 'I must do something!' went towards the door. As she passed the writing-table, her eye rested on the photographs which stood

there. She seized them in her hands. They were the portraits of her mother and of her grandmother. She addressed them solemnly: 'You were father's mother, and you look as if you always made him do as you wished. Yes, your mouth says that, just as if it was alive. But then you were his mother; he could not help loving you. You were his mother and he was your son. You did what you did because you had a mother's right. So you need not look so *dreadfully* strong and self-reliant. You could not have managed him as you did if he had not loved you as a son. And you, mother,' continued Joan, kissing the face of the younger woman, 'how beautiful you are! You look as if you are asking for his love. Well, he gave it to you, you know. Why do you still ask? He never refused. Why don't you look certain of it, as his mother does? He never refused you the love you wanted. You have got it now. What is the matter, mother dear? What are you asking for now?'

Suddenly Joan put down the photographs and stood wondering. The thought had flashed upon her that perhaps her mother was right, after all, about Millicent. Perhaps her father had no right to conceal anything from Harold. Perhaps

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it was wrong to be dishonest even to secure the happiness of Millicent; perhaps she had been unjust to her mother, who was unwilling to deceive Harold, and to let him take in ignorance a step which he might one day regret!

Joan's face burned, and she put her hand up to her cheek and pressed it, as if she were trying to press the pain out of her heart and brain. If only she could let herself believe that all her mother wanted was to be honest, then how gladly would Joan have applauded her, in spite of the pain which she was causing to Millicent and Harold. But Joan knew that her mother would never have wished to enlighten Harold, if she had not been jealous of his bride's happiness, and had not wanted it instead for her own child. It was this knowledge which filled Joan with shame, and seemed to take the glow out of her young life, and leave behind a bitterness which repelled her. Joan felt bewildered. In her own heart she knew that it was right to tell Harold all that there was to tell about Millicent's father. But at the same time, if her mother had been on the side of the deceivers, Joan would have found it far easier to yield to Margaret the love and homage which were her due.

Joan's cheeks were on fire, and she pressed them harder than ever. Then she gave a smothered childlike sob, and ran out of the library upstairs to her own room. She put on her hat quickly and went out. She must speak her heart to somebody, to somebody who would see clearly the simple truth which *must* be hidden somewhere in this strange, confusing mass of right and wrong. As she had done in her childhood, Joan was running to-day to the dear old Nana, who had begun her professional career as old Mrs. Carey's 'general,' and who had followed the family fortunes in all their vicissitudes. Now she was set up in a pretty ivy-grown cottage as a householder, and had a pension and a little great-niece to give brightness to her declining years. Old Nana had always been able to comfort Joan. It was such a relief to look at the bright smile on the old woman's face, and to think that she, at least, must have led a life free from problems, a *straight* life marked by little duties obviously claiming her attention, and apparently with no temptation to turn either to the right hand or to the left.

Joan hurried along the village street till she came to Nana's cottage. Then she stood leaning over the hedge which bordered the front

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garden, and watched the little great-niece at play.

'Molly,' she asked at last, 'what are you doing?'

Molly was much too round and comfortable to be startled by this unexpected question. She turned her large blue eyes on Joan, and said, without attempting to get up:

'Good-morning, Miss Joan! I'se busy.'

'But what are you doing?'

'I'se sticking auntie's geranium what's broken off into the ground again. The stalk's all right.'

'But, you silly child! if there is no root, the stalk will never grow.'

Molly looked up in amazement. Joan was exhibiting the density so characteristic of grown-ups.

'*I* know!' she said with dignified importance. 'It's difficult to get the stalk straight, but I'se *pretending*. Of course, if I *can* get the stalk straight, perhaps God'll make it grow.'

The baby face smiled in confident expectation.

'You silly little thing!' said Joan, rather sharply. 'You know He can't.'

She brushed past the child and knocked at the door of the cottage. She did not see the shocked reproof in the blue eyes of Molly,

who continued, undisturbed, to play with the shrivelled pieces of geranium stalk.

‘Why, it’s Miss Joan!’ said Mrs. Smith in a delighted voice, as she opened the door and recognised her visitor; ‘this *is* a surprise. You don’t often come at this time. Come in, miss, and welcome!’

She bustled into the room, which was so crammed with ornaments that any swift movement was fraught with danger. Her visitor followed gingerly, and got safely past the centre table, burdened with a glass vase, the family Bible, the family portrait album, three or four uncut books with bright red edges—the gifts awarded by the proprietors of ‘Starlight Soap’ for the return of their wrappers—and two or three coloured books won by Molly as prizes at the infant school. Joan glanced at the walls, which, in spite of their familiarity, always amused her by their grotesque hideousness. They were decorated with pieces of china nailed up between faded oleographs. Some of the ornaments had curious shapes. In one particular corner two animals with impossible mouths swung unusually red and unusually massive tongues threateningly at visitors. As Joan approached the chair which

Nana had pushed ready for her, she passed a small oak-chest decorated with a heavily fringed mat, upon which stood a tall bottle in which a snake was preserved. It was the gift of a Cornish sailor to Nana when she was a young girl, and it had kept his memory alive for over forty years. Nana made use of her own special seat, the gift of Joan's parents, and watched her visitor, and smiled a sweet, cheery welcome.

With an impulsive movement Joan went to the chair and knelt down by the side of the old woman. The sun came through the little window and lighted up the girl's red hair.

'Oh, Nana dear,' she said, 'I'm so crumpled up. I want you to straighten me.'

The wrinkled hand, slightly notched with rheumatism, rested on Joan's head. The old woman gave a cooing sound, as if she were rocking a baby to sleep.

'There, there, tell me, Miss Joan,' she murmured—'tell Nana.'

Joan put her two hands on the arm of the chair, and, half raising herself, searchingly scanned her friend's face.

'Oh, Nana,' she asked eagerly, 'what would you do—what would you do if things were all in a muddle—if you saw one person wanting what

she oughtn't to want, and another person not wanting what she *ought* to want? Oh, Nana, what would you do?'

The old woman answered with some solemnity:

'I should give my face a good wash, Miss Joan.'

'How absurd you are!' said Joan crossly, getting up from the floor and going to examine, as if with great interest, the grotesque tongues which waggled menacingly at her from the corner. 'I was asking you something important,' she said.

'Don't be vexed, Miss Joan, my dear—don't be vexed. I'm a silly old woman, I know, but I've always believed in a good wash. When you and Miss Milly were little ones, and we had temper or cross words to deal with, I would just try to coax you to have your faces well scrubbed, and then the sunshine would come back to them as sure as sure; somehow, with grown-up people, I believe in it still. But, Miss Joan, come and tell me—tell me more, and I'll try to answer proper, as you want to be answered; but you must make your old Nana understand first, that you must!'

As Joan still stood with her back turned, the old woman rose, and, going over to her, put

her arm gently round the girl's waist and led her back to the chair. For a minute the old head rested on Joan's shoulder.

'You must forgive your old Nana,' she said sweetly.

Joan pressed a kiss on the furrowed forehead. She hated herself for being so disagreeable.

Mrs. Smith found her chair again, and, crooning gently to herself, drew the girl once more on to the floor.

'Well, tell me,' she said.

'I can't say *all*; I can't tell you any names, but I'll make a simple story out of my head, and you must judge between the right and the wrong. Suppose that a man was going to do something wrong in ignorance; he could not possibly have known that it was wrong, but he meant to do it because he believed that it would bring him and other people a great deal of happiness. A woman hated this man, and did not want him to do the wrong thing, not because it was wrong, but just because it seemed as if it would make the man so happy; so, because she hated him so much, she prevented him from doing wrong, just by making him understand what he was doing. She knew that right doing would cause him endless sorrow, while

nobody could blame him for the wrong which was done in ignorance, and which could not help bringing him joy. Would you say that the woman was right ?

Nana rocked herself, and her face was full of trouble.

‘Is that the end, Miss Joan ?’ she asked.

‘No, not quite. Suppose there was another woman who loved the man who was going to do the wrong without knowing it ; she, like the other woman, *saw* the wrong, but she wouldn’t say because she loved the man, and wanted to save him all the suffering which would be caused by right doing. Besides, she thought that doing wrong in ignorance is no sin at all, and she need not interfere. Nana, tell me which was right, the woman who loved or the woman who hated ?’

‘Oh, Miss Joan, what difficult things you do get into your head, to be sure ! Oh dearie, dear, how can I tell ?’

‘Well, it’s no use crying,’ said the girl, who had been made harsh and impatient by her great longing for guidance ; ‘tell me, Nana, *quick*.’

‘I think, Miss Joan,’ said Nana gently, ‘that wrong-doing can never be right ; but if the man *means* to do right I think God will help him ;

and if the woman who loves does what her love tells her, I think, dearie, God won't let her do wrong. But wrong-doing can never be right, Miss Joan.'

'Which would you rather be, Nana, the woman who loves or the woman who hates?' said Joan, shaking the arm of the chair in her anxiety. 'Tell me quickly.'

'I'd be the woman who loves, and I'd leave the rest to God; but there, I'm a wicked old woman, Miss Joan.'

They sat in silence. The old woman had spoken, and the girl was weighing her words.

'You're just like Molly,' said Joan at last.

A bright smile lighted up the old face.

'My Molly! God bless her!' said Nana fervently, for she loved her Molly with that passionate, yearning love which exists at the bottom of every old maid's heart. 'How am I like my baby, Miss Joan?'

'Well, Molly amuses herself by sticking bits of broken geranium into the ground, and fancies God will make them whole.'

'Do she, indeed, missy—do she, indeed!' murmured Nana. 'And how am I like Molly, then?'

'You expect God to make our lives as straight as Molly's geranium stalks.'

Nana did not understand the simile, but assented vigorously, in order to please her visitor.

Joan felt that it was useless to wait for further assistance from Nana, and so she bade her good-afternoon. As she passed Molly she called to her to go in and talk to auntie.

'I've got to *finish*,' answered the child protestingly. 'It's not fair to the others.' Joan banged the gate and hurried down the lane which led to her home.

As she walked she mused over the fact that, according to Nana, love for Millicent should keep Mrs. Carey silent, and then God would justify her action for the sake of the motive which inspired it.

'Is Mr. Carey in?' she asked the butler, who opened the door to her.

'Yes, miss ; he's in the study.'

'Is Mrs. Carey with him ?'

'No, miss ; I *think* not. She's gone to her bedroom. She *was* with him, miss.'

There was some hidden significance in the man's tone which made Joan wince. She looked at him, and was convinced that this man knew of the angry scene which had passed between his master and mistress. Joan's cheeks

tingled with shame as she sprang up the stairs to her room. A Browning was lying open on her bed. She took up the volume to place it on her shelf. A marker fell out, and Joan, in spite of her hurry, looked at the page it indicated. A passage was marked with blue chalk : ' All I could never be, all men ignored in me ; this I was worth to God.'

Joan closed the book with a bang. She went to the glass to take off her hat, but stood for a moment with one hand raised, arrested by a thought. Then she sighed deeply.

' It's the same story,' she said ; ' the motive again. Molly, Nana, and Browning, they all believe alike—and I *can't*, and I'm a Christian, too. I must go to father,' she added piteously, her voice sounding plaintive, as if she were appealing against opposition.

Mr. Carey was sitting by his table in his study. He did not hear Joan tap, nor see her as she stood at the door watching him, wishing that he would notice her, and half angry with him for looking gray and sad. She gave a timid cough.

' Ah, Joan !' he said, holding out his arm to her in the affectionate way Joan knew so well. Joan sprang to his side, to be encircled by that

comforting arm. 'My little girl looks solemn,' said Mr. Carey playfully.

'Father, I know all!'

'Indeed—indeed,' he said, rather wearily. Then he drew her on to his knee, and, patting her hand, said: 'And what do you know?'

'About Millicent and her father, and the dreadful secret mother is going to tell Harold.'

'Mother is not going to tell.'

Joan jumped to her feet with a glad cry.

'I *knew*—I *knew*,' she said, '*you* could persuade her; you always make people do what is right.'

'Not so fast, little woman—not so fast. I am not sure that it is right to keep much back from Harold. Of course, he knows that Millicent's father went wrong before he left this country to take up his life in Australia. I don't think that anything else I could tell him would alter his feeling towards Millicent. If he cares for her as deeply as I believe, I think he would marry her in the teeth of conscience itself. I must have time to watch his strength, but at present I do not see why, for the sake of my old friend and his child, I may not take what sin there may be on my own soul, and leave

these children in ignorance. Your mother has promised me to wait.'

Joan longed to know what he had promised in return, but dared not make any inquiry.

'Poor father!' she said, taking his hand; 'life is so muddly, isn't it? It's wicked of you to hide the truth, but it's good, too, for you do it for your friend's sake. It's wrong of Harold to marry Millicent, believing what he does about drink, but it would be *dreadfully* wrong to throw her over. Oh, father, how can one ever tell how to act?'

'One must go slowly and—and trust.'

He gave a little cough; he was near dangerous ground.

'You too, father!'

'I too, child? What do you mean?'

She told him about Molly and Nana, and then she looked to him to tell her what he felt about this philosophy. The longing in her eyes broke down his natural reserve. He smoothed the hair from off her hot forehead, and spoke slowly, and as if he wanted to drive away her troubles by his words.

'I have tried ever since I was a young man, ever since I married, to go slowly—just one step at a time—and to leave the distance to

God. I don't expect miracles, as Molly does, but I do expect God in His wisdom and love to keep me in the right path as long as I look after my steps faithfully. The muddles and mistakes come, I think, from hurrying and flustering. We are so anxious about the end of our paths ; we keep our eyes on the turning which we see in the dim distance, and which we are dreadfully anxious not to miss. Meanwhile, we stumble over the stones just in front of our feet. All my life, Joan, I have felt as I feel to-day—the presence of a Power outside myself which will guide me if I allow it to do so. Some effort on my part is also needed. I have to force my steps to go straight. If I stumble, it is not God's fault ; it is because I have disobeyed.'

'But you can't be sure of His commands. That is just the difficulty ; now, to-day if He would only show us——'

'Perhaps He will, Joan. But if God made everything quite clear to us, He would be robbing us of some of our birthright, of some of our *human* joy. It is our *right* to triumph over temptation by our own efforts. We experience joy in following God because it is within our power to go against Him if we will.

The peace which is the joy of joys of our human life is the peace which follows victory, not certainty. I made your mother promise to wait because I *think* that, if I allowed her to tell Harold everything to-day, she would do so merely because she wants Millicent to wait for her happiness until our child has what she deserves, and that would hardly be fair.'

'And I *have* everything, father! Tell her—tell her!' cried Joan in an excited voice.

'Your mother does not think so, Joan, and while she feels as she does to-day, I know it would be wrong for her to act. We must go slowly, and when your mother feels that she is speaking for right's sake, then she shall speak. I dare say the time will come soon.'

'Did you see the man?' asked Joan, after a pause.

'Which man, Joan?'

'Millicent's father!'

'Yes, yes, I saw him, poor fellow!'

'But wouldn't it be *right* for Millicent to see him? Might she not help him to live better?'

'No; it is far better for him to go quietly away for ever. If Millicent knew him now as father, he would know his own degradation. He couldn't live at all then. So he has resolved to

go. You see that our course is fairly clear, isn't it? We must not keep him here.'

The butler knocked at the door, and announced Mr. Ellis. 'And if you please, sir, Mrs. Carey wants to know if you will be ready for dinner in fifteen minutes.'

'To be sure, to be sure; the concert and early dinner. Good-evening, Ellis; Joan and I have been having a regular gossip, and quite forgot about the concert, and——'

'That you had invited me. Never mind, Mr. Carey; I expect there will be enough for me.'

'Always enough for my old friends, I hope, Ellis. You are coming, are you not, Joan? You'd better hurry up and get dressed. Where are Harold and Millicent? Are they not coming home?'

'Yes, they are coming home. But, father, I don't think I'll come to the concert; I'm rather tired.'

'Tired?' said Richard Ellis, raising his eyebrows. 'How many hours have you been painting to-day, Miss Joan?'

'I have not been painting to-day; but even conversation——'

'*Conversation?* Absurd!' he said under his

breath, but still with biting emphasis. 'You had better come with us.'

Joan left the room immediately, with a meekness which astonished and annoyed her father.

'You seem to have my daughter in hand remarkably well,' said Mr. Carey irritably, after the door had closed.

'That is because she has character, and is used to look after other people—a weak friend and all that kind of thing. Have you not noticed that strong girls love to be ordered about? So few people dare to do it, and the feminine in them cries out for it. The man who *dares* has his own way as far as he chooses to take it.'

Richard Ellis threw his ungainly figure into an arm-chair and stretched out his legs. Mr. Carey looked at him with some disgust. Perhaps his wife was right, after all, and it would be better to forbid this man the house.

'Will you excuse me for a moment, Ellis? I have something to fetch.'

'Certainly! Perhaps your notes for your speech at the concert? I am glad I am not a parish swell.'

Mr. Carey shut the door rather sharply. Ellis was quite right; the chairman disliked this

parish function, and was nervous about his opening speech.

Joan was just putting the last hairpins into her hair, when the sound of weeping in the hall made her hurry on to the landing. She looked over the banisters and saw Millicent leaning on Harold's arm and crying bitterly. Mr. and Mrs. Carey came out of the boudoir.

'What is this?' cried Mr. Carey. 'What is the matter, Millicent? Is she ill, Harold?'

'Oh no; Millicent is all right,' said Harold reassuringly. 'She is only a little frightened. A ruffianly, drunken tramp has been following us up the drive. As I was shutting the gate, he seized Millicent's hand and mauled it all over, and called himself her father and I don't know what else. I gave him something he didn't bargain for, but he followed us just the same, and I can't comfort Millicent.' Then, addressing the girl, he continued soothingly: 'Hush, hush, dear! he can't follow us now. Hush! people won't recognise your red eyes as those which they are accustomed to gape at. They will want their money back. Hush, dear! you're safe now. Let's call Joan to console you. He can't follow you now. Why, good heavens! why didn't the idiots close the window?'

This exclamation was caused by the appearance of the tramp, who had climbed on to a chest which stood by the window in the passage leading to the garden door, and had thus found his way to the hall. He was coming towards Millicent with his hands outstretched, and muttering, in a thick voice which was quite beyond his control:

'Who'll take my precious girl from me? *That's* my girl. She's mine, and no one shall say she isn't! Who dares say she isn't? I'll knock him down! I——'

Mr. Carey raised his arm to strike the man into silence, but it fell again to his side. The tramp lay in a drunken swoon, with his face upturned. Millicent's tears had stopped as soon as her persecutor appeared. They seemed arrested by the horror with which he inspired her. She stood with eyes fixed on the man who claimed to be her father, and her fingers clutched Harold's arm.

'She is like her father!' said Mrs. Carey in a hoarse whisper, which, nevertheless, penetrated Millicent's brain. The girl became unconscious in Harold's arms.

CHAPTER VI

To the end of her days Joan prayed that her mother had not meant to disclose Eric Frankland's identity on the first evening of his return. The prayer was meaningless and absurd, but it seemed to relieve the girl of a burden of shame.

Mr. Carey carried Millicent into the boudoir, and laid her on the sofa. Joan ran downstairs to minister to her. As she passed Richard Ellis their eyes met. He had been bending over the fallen drunkard, and, as he raised his face, Joan saw an expression of scorn on his set lips.

She went into the boudoir with her parents and closed the door. Harold had gone into the drive to get air and to think.

'Miss Joan!' called Ellis through the door a few minutes later.

Joan came out.

'Is there a tap of cold water anywhere near

here? I want to carry him out and souse him well.'

'Millicent has not come to, yet,' said Joan, in a hard, dry voice, as if that fact alone was of importance.

'I don't mean Millicent; I mean the man—her father. I want to bring him to his senses, and make him uncomfortable at the same time. I should like to thrash him, too, if he were more of a man; but whatever I did to him, I could not give him his deserts.'

'Have you no pity, Mr. Ellis?'

'No, none for that sort. You should see his hands. He has never done an honest day's work all his life. I've no pity for gentlemen who are loafers, even when they keep sober. When they take to drink, they should be hunted down like vermin.'

'But, for Millicent's sake——'

'I want the tap,' answered Ellis laconically.

'It is outside on the right of the front door, but don't let him recover and go back to Millicent.'

She left him to drag his victim across the hall to the door, and returned to her friend.

Millicent's white face was becoming slightly tinged with colour. Joan had never seen her

look more beautiful. Mr. Carey was patting her slender hand, while his wife pressed cool applications to her forehead. At last the eyelashes moved, and a moment later the eyelids lifted and disclosed an expression of hunted pain. Millicent raised herself on to her arm.

‘I can’t remember,’ she said, with some effort. ‘Auntie, what is the matter with me? Where is Harold? Why are you standing there?’

‘We were alarmed about you, darling,’ said Mr. Carey, with extreme gentleness. ‘You fainted, and we lifted you on to the sofa. Now you are better, but you must, nevertheless, rest for a while. Harold will be here in a minute, and must not see any trace of this attack.’

‘There, Millicent, lie down, dearie,’ said Joan, following her father’s lead. ‘You will be all right after you have rested for a little.’

Millicent lay back for a few moments. Then she suddenly sprang off the sofa on to her feet crying frantically, ‘Where is he—where——’

‘Child, you are dreaming!’ said Mr. Carey, gently taking her by the arm and trying to lead her back to the sofa.

She shook herself free. Mrs. Carey was now sitting on the window seat, afraid to look at the suffering which she had helped to cause.

Millicent ran to her, and took her hands and forcibly raised her bowed head.

‘Auntie, you shall tell me again. I must know the truth. Is he my father?’

The light of the setting sun came through the window, and formed a halo round Millicent’s fair head. Her eyes, too, seemed full of light. Joan came forward, and her mother looked from Millicent straight on to her child, and fierce anger clutched at her heart.

‘Tell me, auntie!’ persisted Millicent, with hands outstretched in graceful appeal.

‘Yes, yes; he is your father!’ said Mrs. Carey quickly. ‘But you cannot help it, dear.’

Millicent’s arms fell. She went back to the sofa, laid her head on the cushion, and sobbed in her great weakness.

Margaret looked at her husband, who was watching her in sorrow and pity.

‘I wish you would tell your own lies!’ she said fiercely, as she walked past him out of the room.

‘She would have learned the truth gradually,’ he said.

Mr. Carey made a sign to Joan, who was leaning over her friend and trying to console her. She followed him to a corner of the room, and he whispered :

‘I will try to get Ellis to accompany your mother to the concert, take the chair, and make apologies for me. I must see to this poor fellow, and speak to Harold. Look after Millicent, and make her brave. God has shown us clearly enough, after all, that both the children had to know.’

‘Millicent,’ said Joan very gently, after her father had left them alone, ‘won’t you look up and speak to me?’

Millicent shook her head, and pressed it further in the cushion.

‘You’ll make yourself ill and worry Harold.’

‘Where is Harold?’ said Millicent, raising her tear-stained face at once. ‘You had better tell him to go home; we must not let him stay here now.’

‘Why not? Harold loves you more than everything else in the world.’ The words sounded clear and strong. Joan meant to convince Millicent, although she herself suffered in the effort.

‘What’s the good of that?’ asked Millicent impatiently.

‘The *good*? Why, what else *can* you want?’

‘He promised to marry me, and now—now what can I expect?’

‘That he will keep his word. Why, Millicent, it is not *your* fault that your father is what he is. Surely Harold, with his strong love, will not allow anybody to come between you now.’

‘But, you see, father would have to belong to us both,’ said Millicent piteously.

‘What then? Harold can bear things as well as you.’

‘No, no, no!’ said Millicent, with unexpected intensity. ‘You only say this because you love me, and want me to be happy. You have always treated me like a little weak thing who must be petted and kissed and not allowed to fret. You must change your ways now; do you hear?’

There were tears on the beautiful long lashes, but the voice was firm all the same. Joan looked at her friend in loving admiration.

‘You have got to help me to do what is right, Joan—that’s what a friend is for; but you must let me bear pain just like other people. If you argue against the truth to please me, you will soon get ashamed of me.’

‘Oh, Millicent, how *can* you talk like this?’

‘You know I ought not to marry him, and so you had better say so.’

There was a falter now in Millicent’s voice.

In spite of all her courage, she yearned to be told that wrong was right, if wrong meant happiness.

'I don't think we need talk about Harold just now,' said Joan. 'There would not be the slightest reason for him to change, even if you had a hundred fathers; you'd always be yourself, you see. But as for you, I think you should try to love your father, especially as he has no one else to care for him.'

Millicent shuddered.

'Perhaps he could not help going down like this; perhaps he had some terrible trouble; perhaps he was badly brought up.'

'Perhaps his father was a drunkard, too,' interrupted Millicent.

'No, no, darling, you must not say that!' said Joan, clinging to the girl, and even shaking her slightly in her intense excitement. Millicent's voice was harsh; her gentle nature seemed to be yielding to a hardening influence which terrified her friend. 'You must try to win him back through love, and trust that God will help you. You must not dread horrible things, which are impossible if there's a God at all.'

'I love him so!' said Millicent irrelevantly, for

her thoughts had gone back to Harold ; ' I can't bear to live without him.' Her voice was natural again in spite of its tremulousness.

' And you shan't, darling, in the end. But while you wait, to be sure about Harold, make up your mind to help your father. We all want you so much, but perhaps your father wants you most of all. You *must* help him.'

' If I can,' said Millicent, again with a shudder.

' Listen, dear ! I will tell you why your father went away. It was for your sake. He knew his weakness, and he felt that you would not be happy if you lived with him. So he was brave enough to go right away to Australia, and to leave you here, with every provision made for your education and happiness. But his love for you, for the one creature in the world who belonged to him, was so strong that he came back to see you. He hung about this place watching for you.'

' How do you know ?'

' The village people told me that they saw a man, whom they called a tramp, about our gate, and I sent father to speak to him.'

' How horrible ! Oh, Joan, don't tell me any more !'

‘There is nothing more to tell. I am sure your father did not mean to show himself to you. If he hadn’t lost control over himself, I don’t believe that you would ever have known anything about your father. *My* father told me this evening that Eric Frankland would not realize his degradation fully until he saw disgust written in his daughter’s eyes. He intended, for the sake of his great love, to go right away and leave you to be happy—to go away and die among strangers. But God planned differently.’

‘I wish He hadn’t,’ said poor Millicent weakly.

‘Come, dear, you must be brave. This thing was brought about by God, and so you must believe that it is a good thing. Perhaps God means you to mend your father’s broken life with your love. God saw that he was ready to sacrifice his happiness and leave you, and so God rewarded him for his good intention by not allowing him to fulfil it.’

Millicent looked at her friend questioningly. What had happened to Joan? A few hours ago she had been struggling with all sorts of doubt, and had felt almost irritated by the faith expressed by those whom she had consulted in

her need. Now she seemed to have absorbed that very faith, and was formulating it for the benefit of her friend. Joan had lived long enough to discover that sincere questioning is the foundation of belief, and that the needs of another soul provide the cement which is essential to its structure. Now she recovered from the surprise afforded her by her own arguments, and continued bravely :

‘While you wait, Millicent, you will find it a comfort to be with your father, and see how your love helps him to lead a better life. For his sake, dear, and for your own, you will never let him know how you saw him for the first time. He can only be kept straight by the belief that you do not know his sin, and the hope that you may never know it.’

‘Well, Joan, and how is our patient?’ said Mr. Carey, peeping into the room and speaking in a hushed voice.

‘I am not asleep, uncle,’ said Millicent, standing up and taking Mr. Carey’s hand in hers, while a trembling smile played about her lips.

‘You look taller, my dear.’

‘Perhaps I have grown during the last half-hour, or perhaps I have been in this room for

several years. I feel as if I had,' she added, with a sob.

• He drew her to him.

• 'My poor little girl!' he said, kissing her golden head.

'Where's father?'

'He is being well looked after, my dear.'

'Has he come round yet?'

• 'I don't think so.'

• 'Will you go to him, then, Uncle George, and watch by his side, so that when he wakes nobody shall tell him that I know what I know. He must never be told, uncle—never, and when he is better you must persuade him to come here for a chat; say that I have gone to bed, and that he will see nobody; then I will steal upon you suddenly, and you must introduce us as if you were a creature of impulse, as he is—and—and couldn't help it. Go, Uncle George; be *quick*!'

'God bless our little schemer!' said Mr. Carey, as he went out to do her bidding.

Joan drew Millicent to her, and hugged away some of the bruises with which the girl's spirit was sore.



It was close on midnight when Joan stood by Millicent's bed and gently roused her. Millicent had been resting in her soft white dressing-gown, and her golden hair lay in beautiful waves about her pillow. Joan had persuaded her to take this rest, while she herself waited downstairs for the return of her father and his guest.

'They have been in the study about a quarter of an hour. You'd better go in and fetch a book.'

Millicent got up from her bed, and Joan saw with some anxiety that she walked rather unsteadily, as one in a dream.

'You must be brave, dear,' she whispered.

'Yes, yes, I'll manage,' said Millicent; but she rested on her friend as she walked downstairs.

A moment later there was a gentle tap at the study-door.

'Is that a ghost?' said Mr. Carey, jumping up and opening the door. 'Why, Millicent, are you walking in your sleep? It's midnight, my dear——'

'I came—to—to—fetch a book,' said Millicent, frightened by the excellence of the other's acting. 'Who's in there, uncle? I can't go in like this.'

‘Yes, come in ; there is no one to frighten you,’ said Mr. Carey, drawing the girl into the room. ‘This is your father, Millicent.’

‘My father !—where—where ?’ cried Millicent in well-feigned excitement.

‘For a moment neither Millicent nor George Carey saw Frankland as he crouched behind the arm-chair, afraid of his child.

- ‘Come out, man!’ cried George, forcibly raising Frankland for the second time that night, and dragging him from his hiding-place. The light of the lamp fell full on Millicent’s face and white gown as she stood before her father, a figure radiant in white and gold. Frankland rested his eyes on her, and they filled with a passionate, yearning love, which, for a moment, transformed the sunken, dissipated face. Father and daughter stood and looked, afraid to approach one another. ‘You have so often asked after your father ; here he is, Millicent,’ said George Carey encouragingly.

‘Yes, I wanted a father like Joan’s father,’ said Millicent piteously.

The man in front of her flinched, and an expression of anguish came over his face. Millicent feared that she had betrayed herself.

As if to make amends, she sprang to her father and placing her arms round his neck, cried bravely, 'And he's come!'

Then she drew him on to the chair and knelt by his side, hiding her face.

Poor Millicent had touched the drunkard's clothes, and she sank to the ground trying to hide the repulsion which was in her heart, and which she felt must be expressed on her face.

'And he has come,' she repeated mechanically, playing with her father's hand, which was as soft and white as her own.

Eric Frankland mumbled endearing terms.

'You are both tired out,' said George Carey, raising Millicent; 'say good-night to your new-found father and go to bed. You shall make each other's acquaintance in the morning.'

Millicent rose. She was longing to escape from her father's presence.

Eric Frankland looked at her again, and her beauty once more intoxicated him. He pressed fierce kisses on her lips.

Millicent sobbed, 'Good-night, good-night, father!' and rushed out of the room, to be supported up the stairs by Joan's strong, loving arms.

CHAPTER VII

HAROLD FRENCH did not go home that night. Instead, he walked along the country roads, trying to make up his mind whether he should marry Millicent or kill himself.

He hated himself for having ever had any theories on life at all, for ever having evolved for himself a standard of social ethics. If he had been a happy-go-lucky kind of fellow, told himself, he could have married Millicent and ignored the existence of her father. It was only because he cared about the good of society that he had all this bother now. But although his vanity was flattered while he considered his altruistic weaknesses, he could not regain his normal peace of mind. When he said to himself, 'D—— society! I'm going to be happy. Millicent is the most perfect creature in existence; she loves me, and I am going to marry her,' the darkness round him seemed in

its very silence to mock at his heroics. When in another mood he faced the possibility of life apart from Millicent, the darkness in front of him seemed to form itself into a vast abyss, and threaten him with instant destruction. Suddenly he knocked up against another man.

‘Hullo! who’s there?’ he cried in an aggrieved voice, as if the King’s highway was reserved for himself and his doubts that night.

‘I was going to ask the same question,’ said Richard Ellis.

‘I did not recognise you,’ said Harold, scarcely concealing his disgust at the meeting.

‘No; one can’t see very well in the dark, can one?’ answered Richard Ellis, with a sneer. He knew that the other disliked him, and he returned the feeling with interest. ‘You’re out late.’

‘Yes, so are you. Good-night!’

‘Do you often walk along the lane so late?’ asked Ellis, not choosing to take his departure at Harold’s bidding.

‘No; do you?’

‘Yes, I like it. Shall we walk together a bit?’

‘Just as you like. I was going home now; I’m getting tired.’

‘Indeed; then it is lucky that I met you. I know this lane well even in the dark. Do you know that you are walking away from the Manor?’

Harold turned round and walked rapidly, while Ellis strode next to him pace by pace. At last Ellis said:

‘It’s awkward for Millicent that her father has turned up.’

‘I have no doubt that Miss Frankland takes a different view from you on the subject,’ hissed Harold between his teeth.

Ellis gave a long, low whistle.

‘Hullo!’ he said; ‘didn’t think you’d turn as quickly as all that.’

‘Explain yourself,’ said Harold, stopping dead, and he clenched his fists in impotent rage. How he wished that it were considered good form in England for a gentleman to kill the man he hates.

‘Oh, I dare say I was misinformed; only I heard that you had special views on intemperance, and had sworn never to marry a drunkard’s daughter—that’s all. Probably I am mistaken; but when you spoke so stiffly of your betrothed, I thought——’

‘Your thoughts be——’

‘You are not courteous.’

‘I don’t intend to be, either. Which way are you going? I am going the other.’

‘Well, as you want to get back to the Manor I will stop out a while longer; our homes lie in the same direction.’

‘No; for the sake of the men and women now wrapped in unconsciousness it would be best for you not to walk abroad any longer,’ said Harold, blurting out his words in unreasoning rage.

‘Thanks! Good-night! I am sorry that you are so angry,’ said Ellis, whose temper was still perfectly under control, ‘but I dare say Joan will console you. The two girls are different enough, but the sympathy of either is worth having. In this respect Joan is almost as generous to you as *Miss Frankland* herself. Nobody could accuse George Carey of irregular habits. Good-night, French.’

Ellis walked off, and a mocking laugh reached Harold through the darkness, and helped to bewilder him as he stood in the middle of the road, foolishly blinking in the darkness.

‘Joan? Joan? What does the fellow mean?’ mused Harold, suddenly feeling uncomfortably

hot. Surely Joan had never felt for him anything but the most ordinary friendship. They had been children together, and had always got on capitally, but surely—surely——

Richard Ellis was a keen observer of men and women, and Joan's secret had not remained hidden from his sight. He had betrayed her brutally at a moment when his heart was filled with contempt for the man who had her affection and was unconscious of his possession. Ellis had pulled a veil from Harold's eyes. He had not considered what effect his careless words might produce on Harold's relations with Joan. Perhaps his own susceptibilities were still too blunt for him to imagine the pain which his revelation might bring to the girl, if she ever discovered that it had been made. How could he, a man of rough breeding, divine the depth of misery which, as a girl, she would have to endure in Harold's company if she became aware that he knew her love and rejected it for the sake of another? Of course, her rival was the friend whom Joan loved better than happiness itself, as Ellis knew full well. It was fairly easy for Joan to rejoice unselfishly in Millicent's good fortune so long as her *amour propre* was unaffected; but when she knew

that her secret was no longer her own, and that Harold, by the right of his new knowledge, was allowing himself to contrast her faults with the charms of Millicent, would her whole-hearted devotion to her friend remain undisturbed? The words which might prove so destructive to Joan's self-respect and to her friendship with Millicent dinned in Harold's ears as he walked rapidly away from the Manor House. Gradually he began to remember some little indiscretions of which Joan had in the past been guilty, and which might, at the time, have made a more vain man consider the nature of her friendship for him. In the first place, she was always a little self-conscious when he spoke to her, while in conversation with others she was generally aggressively natural. Then she had always taken any lapse on his part as seriously as if she shared his shame. Of course, he had believed that she cared merely for Millicent's sake, but now——

Again, he remembered that she had always been ready to give up for him any little pleasure which interfered with his plans, and to exert herself to the utmost so that he might have gratification. Yet Joan would never allow him to thank her, or in any way to show that he

knew that she had behaved thus for his sake. Moreover, as he recalled the two occasions when he had been angry with her, he felt quite ashamed of the effect his annoyance had upon her. The first was when, as a boy of thirteen, he was spending the afternoon with the Careys. Joan had got into a temper after she had been scolded for untidiness, and she had kept the whole party waiting for tea because she refused to come downstairs. Harold had the normal schoolboy's interest in his meals, and he had not been afraid to tell Joan that he objected to having his food spoiled by her tantrums. She had raged at him for impertinence, and had read him a lecture on company manners. When, however, on his way home, he caught sight of her in the shrubbery, he discovered that she was crying bitterly, and that a few kind words from his gracious lips consoled her immediately.

Again, a few months ago he had remonstrated with Joan for going out with Millicent and himself in an ill-fitting dress. On this occasion she had snubbed him unmercifully for his pains. But in the evening he remembered now that he had noticed how quiet she was, and how red and heavy her eyes appeared. In fact, he had confided to his mother when he

went home that he was afraid that Joan was growing more ugly every month.

As Harold recalled these small incidents, he struck his boot savagely with his stick.

'Fool!' he muttered to himself, as he turned and walked hurriedly towards home, believing that he had given Ellis sufficient time to get out of his way. 'But I never thought she was this sort of girl.'

The next moment, a certain conventional chivalry, which belonged to Harold's character induced him to try to defend Joan against the testimony of his recollection and the suggestions of a 'jealous cad.' He was deeply imbued with the conceptions of his set with regard to the relations of men and women in love affairs. If he once believed Joan capable of giving her love spontaneously without any regard to the law of supply and demand, she would lose in his sight the respect which was her due. So Harold struggled to stifle his awakening suspicions, but his efforts were rather spasmodic and ineffectual.

Just before Harold reached the Manor he began to wonder how Richard Ellis had come to know so much about him and his views of matrimony. Had Joan babbled about him?

Harold did not know how anxious Margaret Carey was to shame him into greater strength, that he might, for the sake of his conscience, thwart Millicent's happiness. Had he known this he might have remembered that Mr. Ellis accompanied Margaret Carey to the village concert that evening, and have surmised that she probably used her opportunity well.

The next morning Harold came down late; Mrs. French had breakfast alone with her younger son and daughter. She was a gentle, delicate lady, accustomed to be treated very kindly by the world, and to nestle comfortably in its love, appreciating its generosity and recognising her own limitations.

'Harold is late,' she said, as she handed Dick his second cup of coffee.

'Good luck, too!' answered the boy unamiably.

'What has Harold done to you?' asked Kitty.

'Swore at me because he couldn't find his stud. Awful temper this morning, Kits; I advise you to look out.'

'He is always nice to me,' said Kits, with a slight upward jerk of her pretty little nose.

'Especially when you maul his letters

about!' retorted Dick, as Kitty rose to examine Harold's correspondence, which was laid out on the sideboard.

But Kits was indifferent to her brother's words.

'There's a letter from Millicent,' she sang out cheerfully. 'His temper will improve all right.'

'Wonder what she wrote to him about. Saw him yesterday evening. Girls have got such a lot of time for rot. I hate letters!'

'Perhaps they had a row,' continued Kits meditatively; 'I expect she is writing to make up.'

'Hush, hush, children! Leave your brother's affairs alone. He can look after them without your help. Ah, here he is!'

'Good-morning, mother. I'm sorry I'm late.'

Harold spoke moodily.

'Suppose you're too upset to say good-morning to me?' said Kitty, rather pertly.

'Oh, good-morning, Kits!'

'Aren't we solemn? Here's a letter to cheer us up.'

Harold looked at the writing and put the letter in his pocket.

‘Won’t you read it? May do you good,’ said Kitty.

‘You shut up!’

‘Go upstairs,’ said Mrs. French anxiously. ‘Your brother’s not well.’

‘Told you so. Come on, Kits! we don’t want to stay and hear him growl. When *I’m* in a temper and come down late people don’t say I’m not well. Come on, Kits!’

They went off, and Harold sat down to the table and attacked his egg with a grievous want of interest.

‘Is anything the matter, Harold love?’

‘The matter? No, mother. I’m all right; I have got a headache, and slept badly. Don’t bother about me, dear.’

She looked at him critically. Then she came behind his chair and put her hand to his forehead.

‘You’re not feverish, love!’ she said, with a sigh of relief, and went out of the room. ‘A temperature’ was the only test of *malaise* which Mrs. French would accept as reliable. ‘He’s quite normal, so there can’t be much the matter,’ she argued, as she went up to her room.

Mrs. French had lost her husband in a railway accident. ‘If he hadn’t been killed out-

right he would have had a terrible temperature,' she told her friends in an aggrieved tone, as if death had not treated the poor man quite fairly, inasmuch as it had robbed him of so interesting a possession.

Harold hardly waited for the door to close behind his mother before he opened Millicent's letter and began to read. It was a short note, pathetic in its childishness. It told him not to come near her, for she was afraid her good resolutions might break down if she saw him. She assured him that she was quite determined not to spoil his life by marrying him. She was terribly sorry that the happy time between them was at an end, but she meant to do all she could for her father for the rest of her life, without troubling anybody else. Millicent's note ended with many expressions of love.

Harold left his breakfast unfinished, and, going to the window and drawing it up, stepped on to the veranda. The air of the dining-room oppressed him with its closeness.

'It's all rot,' he mused! 'I must go to Millicent and tell her so. Men always think a lot of their principles till the right girl turns up; then all they know is that nothing shall stand in

the way of their happiness. I'm not going to be better than the rest. Why should I?' He strolled into the kitchen-garden and began to pick at the bushes in an abstracted manner, which threatened the welfare of the produce. 'If this fellow hadn't turned up,' pondered Harold, following out the line of his thoughts, 'I should never have known that Millicent was not descended straight from heaven. He can't prevent her being an angel, and I expect he won't last long—these fellows never do—or he may run away in a few months and give us peace.'

Suddenly Harold's meditations were interrupted by a yell. He looked up, and saw Dick running towards him, crying :

'I say, Harold, Joan Carey is waiting to see you, and wants to know how much longer you mean to keep her.'

Harold hurried towards the house in obedience to this summons.



CHAPTER VIII

‘My message was not so rude as Dick wants to make out,’ said Joan, coming to meet Harold. They shook hands, and he invited her to come and see a new rose-tree which had been planted in the further kitchen-garden.

‘How’s Millicent?’ he asked, after a few moments’ silence.

‘I have not seen her yet this morning. She did not sleep much, and has not come down yet. She does not know I have come, Harold.’ She spoke his name in a voice full of reproach.

‘Well?’ he asked abruptly.

‘Haven’t you written an answer yet?’


‘How could I? I only received Millicent’s note a few minutes ago.’

‘She means it.’

Harold shrugged his shoulders rather rudely.

‘I must go and see her,’ he said.

‘Somebody has told her of your scientific



theories of marriage, but it was other things that made her decide to write.'

'Did you tell her, Joan?'

She did not condescend to reply.

'I promised Millicent that I would come to you, and persuade you that she wishes you to be free. I hoped that before I came you would have written to her, and assured her that your love was unchanged, and that you would not accept your discharge. I hoped that you would have told her by now that you knew your theories to be crude, and that you would not allow them to spoil your life and her's. Mr. Ellis says——'

'Joan! I hope you have not been discussing my affairs with that fellow.'

'I met Mr. Ellis on my way here. He seems to know a good deal.'

Joan blushed painfully.

'Who told him?' asked Harold fiercely.

'Not I; you may be sure of that!' she answered proudly; but a moment later her feeling of pride changed into one of miserable shame. She knew who had been Ellis's informant, and the motives which suggested the disclosures.

'If Mr. Ellis approaches the subject again,

will you kindly ask him to look after his own business, if he has any, and to leave me to mine.'

After a few moments of silence, Joan said :

'You will have to take Millicent quite seriously. She is in earnest, and, if I were you, I would not go to her too soon. Just now she is trying to feel tenderly towards her father, but she has not even the assistance of happy memories to encourage her. She is suddenly called upon to love and respect a being whose very appearance fills her with horror and—and—contempt. He has swooped down on her existence like a great bomb, crushing her happiness. I don't know where she has got her strength from, but she is determined that she will bear her trouble alone. I admire her more than ever for this,' she added with enthusiasm.

'Do you indeed?' he asked sharply. They were sitting opposite one another on two camp-stools placed against the wall, which commanded a view of both kitchen-gardens. There was a look of cold inquiry in his eyes which Joan resented.

'Yes, I do!' she said emphatically. 'Millicent will be quite perfect, I think, when her will is a little stronger.'

‘So you encourage her to strengthen her will by refusing to marry me?’

‘I can’t help respecting her for what she is doing now; but,’ she added in an undertone, ‘I want her to be happy more than anything else, and if you are man enough——’

‘You do go about your work in a queer way, Joan! Why aid and abet her to resist me just to give me a lot of extra trouble, if it is true that you think me good enough to be her husband?’

‘Oh, you won’t understand!’

‘I would if I could, but so far I can’t see why you have come to me like this to-day. I’m not a blackguard, and I love Millicent.’

‘But don’t you respect her for her unselfishness in wishing to give you up?’

‘Your coming here proves that her whole attitude is an affectation.’

‘Harold, how dare you?’ said Joan, jumping to her feet, her temper getting the better of her sense of fairness. ‘I hope she will remain strong if only to teach you a lesson. You have always had such a smooth time—had your own way since you were a baby. It is quite right that you should be crossed a little now, and have some sort of struggle to obtain the prize which you want.’

‘You will help Millicent to resist for my sake as well as for her’s, then? Is that the action of a friend, Joan?’

‘Don’t talk about friendship to me; you don’t know what the term means.’

‘I am beginning to think you are right.’

‘In what?’ she asked savagely.

‘In despising preconceived ideas of friendship.’

Joan seemed a little mollified by his humility.

‘If I could do anything for Millicent I would do it, whatever it cost me.’

‘Don’t you think she loves me, then?’

‘I know she does.’

‘Then how will it benefit her to keep us apart?’

‘Of course, I can’t do that for long.’

He laughed bitterly.

‘A few moments ago you were furious with me for not having faith in Millicent’s resolutions. Now you yourself——’

‘I tell you she is sincere, but if once we girls love we——’

‘Well, Joan?’

‘We give some part of our souls which we can’t call back. It is given for ever, and is beyond our control. Millicent is determined

to do the best she can with the part she has still in her possession, but if you examine your part, you will see that it contains the rudder of her life. Take firm hold of it, and force it back to take up its work again.'

'You are too fanciful.'

'You are determined not to understand me.'

'Perhaps I understand you better than you think.'

Their eyes met.

'That is not the first time to-day that you have spoken as if you had some hidden meaning. Don't you believe in my love for Millicent?'

'Of course I do.'

'Then what is the matter? Let us go back to the house' he said; and her pride prevented her from pressing him further.

Harold was not usually analytical in his judgments. This morning, however, he prided himself on possessing great psychological insight. He was convinced that Joan was trying to play her own cards, but that every now and then her better motives triumphed over her ambition, and made her plead for her friend against her own interest. If Harold had only been just a trifle less vain, and consequently

less fascinated by the idea of possessing the affection of both girls, he would not have misunderstood Joan so cruelly. He might have seen that the girl was torn between her respect for right as an abstraction, and her longing to save her friend the pain of a grievous disappointment. Harold might have seen that she had long ago put her own love at the back of her life to inspire her to self-realization in directions absolutely remote from its development. To-day she felt worlds apart from Harold.

‘When are you coming to see Millicent?’ she inquired, rather wearily.

‘Are you going to be there to bolster her up?’ he asked.

She felt sore.

‘It’s no use answering you ; good-bye.’

She held out her hand.

‘I will walk with you to the gate.’

‘No, you needn’t do that.’

Harold smiled.

‘Why not ? Are you getting anxious about my manners, Mistress Joan ? Do you wish to test them too ?’

No ; she had never doubted his manners. Ever since they were both grown up, he had

always behaved considerately to her. This fact was not without a suggestion of pain.

They parted at the gate.

'Remember I love Millicent,' he said, as he held her hand.

He spoke earnestly. Her eyes beamed encouraging praise, which should have convinced him of her good faith.

'Nevertheless, his annoyance with her continued even after they had separated.

Only a few yards from the gate of the Manor, Joan again met Richard Ellis. She was half annoyed by his reappearance. Yet she felt rather flattered by the eagerness with which he asked permission to walk with her. Poor Joan was feeling sore and tired after her talk with Harold. It was refreshing to be wanted even by Richard Ellis.

'You don't seem busy to-day,' she said, as they started down the lane together.

'You don't want my company?' asked Ellis, smiling at her sorrowfully.

'Of course I do,' she said truthfully; 'I don't mean to be rude. I am worried.'

'What is the matter? Is French obdurate? Little Miss Millicent is too pretty to have to plead long in vain.'

'She *doesn't* plead. How dare you say so?' asked Joan angrily.

'Doesn't she?' asked Ellis, much amused by her indignation.

'No; she wrote——'

Then Joan drew herself up and was silent. What business was this of Richard Ellis'?

'She wrote bidding her swain adieu, protesting that she would not ruin his life by making him false to his high principles. She promised——'

'Please don't, Mr. Ellis!' interrupted Joan. 'You can have no idea what a girl like Millicent would write, and——'

'And it is impertinent of me to surmise the contents of her letter?'

'A little, perhaps,' said Joan.

'All right; let's talk of something else.'

'Have you no business this morning? You generally seem so much occupied.'

Joan was annoyed with Ellis by this time, and the prospect of a mile's walk in his company did not please her, and she was not even inclined to conceal her vexation under a cover of politeness.

'I have a little time to spare, and I enjoy so much spending it in your company,' he said in

a conciliatory voice. 'I hope you don't mind putting up with me for a while.'

Joan was mollified. She had a chronic yearning to be *really* wanted by people, to make a difference to them when she was in their society. Harold's indifference this morning had accentuated this longing.

'Of course, it is nice to walk together,' she said, and, for the moment at least, she was sincere, 'but I like people to be occupied. I have several theories on the question of work.'

'Oh dear! how thick the air is with theories!' said Ellis. 'People could so soon explain themselves by practical demonstration if they would only give up theorizing. Why don't *you* work, Miss Joan?'

'What can I do? 'I have no work.'

'Paint.'

'I can't.'

'You know you can.'

'But when, and how? I do have a little time to myself, but seldom enough for real work. I don't get on; I have studied so little. It is too late now. My time belongs to my family, and it would be a family crime to devote it to myself.'

‘I don't agree with you. You need to give yourself out in your art. Every girl must give herself out in something. This is one of the primitive instincts of woman-nature, one that civilization cannot modify. She has a craving to leave her sign on time. If she marries and has children, her passion is laid to rest. If she marries and has none, her husband must keep the passion in check by his great love or his great strength; otherwise it will play havoc with his life. If a woman does not marry, her passion must lose itself in her work; otherwise she becomes a misery to herself and those around her, and goes to her grave an object of scorn or pity. That is not your rôle, is it, Miss Joan?’

‘You have no right to speak to me like this,’ said Joan, rather softly.

‘Why didn't you stop me before?’ he asked bluntly.

‘Because——’ She hesitated.

‘Because you dare not. I have spoken the truth. You have realized it many and many a time without my help. I have spoken what is in your heart. Why should my words sound impertinent? They reveal nothing shameful—only a condition of life as essential as it is

universal. The shame is merely conventional. Women make use of it when they desire to humbug the world. It does not suit them to be straightforward.'

'You have a low opinion of women.'

'On the contrary, I prize them very highly, when they have the courage to fulfil themselves. I don't like to see them burning out their hearts with vague longings.'

'There are phases in my life which you cannot understand, Mr. Ellis,' said Joan irrelevantly. She felt irritated, but at the same time rather apologetic.

'Probably ; it is hard for a man and a woman to know each other well unless they have been brought up together. I don't expect you know everything there is to be known about me, Miss Joan.'

He stopped to pick a weed from the hedge. Joan experienced a strong desire for his confidence. She wanted to understand why he interested her so much, and at the same time repelled her. If she understood him she was sure she would like him better ; she *wanted* to like him better. When he rejoined her she said :

'I know nothing about you. People say

that you live with your sister, but we were so surprised that during the election contest your sister did not appear. People say that she left the village. That seemed so queer for a sister. After your defeat she came back to you, and you still live in the little house on the hill. You go up to town often, but she never goes out. People say that your sister is an invalid, but she won't even receive visitors. People have been to call, but when you are out nobody ever answers the door. You don't seem to keep a servant.'

Richard Ellis laughed.

'You know a great deal more than I expected about me, Miss Joan.'

Joan looked uncomfortable.

'In a village like this one can't help hearing. Moreover, a Parliamentary candidate——'

'Please don't apologize. I am proud that the village is interested in us. What more do you know?'

Joan hesitated.

'Come, tell me!' he said, in his queer, masterful manner, which invariably exacted obedience from her.

'Only that—that she plays beautifully. People have listened to her piano and told me. They

say that she practises for hours and hours. I suppose that that is her great pleasure?

‘She fulfils herself in that way, Miss Joan. That is her work.’

‘But why does she just play for herself? May she not let others hear? Sometimes, if people pass close to the window, she stops short, and does not recommence till they are well on their way.’

‘She plays for me—her husband!’

Joan stood still; Richard Ellis faced her, and said very seriously :

‘You see, the village did not get my story quite right, did they? They never said that I was a married man.’

Joan walked fast; anger and shame were in her heart. Richard Ellis had deceived her, and made her ridiculous in the eyes of all who knew her. His interest in her had, of course, been purely intellectual, but what difference did this fact make to the world’s judgment? How she wished that all along she had detested him as she did now! To her shame, however, she had to confess that his interest had been very valuable to her always, and had been growing more and more so during the last agitated months of her career.

‘Why so fast, Miss Joan?’ asked Richard, while Joan hurried on, apparently wishing to ignore his presence. ‘We shall be home so soon,’ he continued, ‘and we have much more to say to one another. What is in your mind now? Why are you angry? What have I done?’

She did not answer.

‘You are frightened of me, Miss Joan.’

‘I am *not*!’ she answered indignantly, but she knew that her words were false. ‘I don’t know why you deceived us all.’

‘I had my reasons, I suppose.’

‘Of course; but here we are at our gate, Mr. Ellis, so you need not trouble to explain. Good-morning!’

She tried to speak lightly as she stood with her hand on the gate.

‘No, Miss Joan; you must hear more of my story now. You must let me walk with you for a little while; I will only keep you for a few minutes.’

‘No; I must go back to Millicent.’

‘French is with her.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I am sure of it. I saw him cutting across the meadow as we walked along the lane. He saw us.’

‘I *must* go in.’

‘You *must* hear me first.’

‘Joan! Joan!’ Mrs. Carey’s voice was heard querulously calling down the drive. Joan was about to answer; Ellis grasped her hand.

‘You must not hear her till you have listened to me. Come!’

He led her into a small shrubbery, and told her to take the chair by his side. Joan became very pale.

‘What are you doing to me, Mr. Ellis? You are forcing me against my will——’

‘Yes, I can do that,’ he said in his quiet voice.

She sprang to her feet in irritation.

‘Sit down, Miss Joan! It is not because you are weak that I can force you, but because it would be unjust of you to go away, knowing so much and so little of my story. The law of right is on my side.’

She looked at him to see if he were mocking her.

‘You are only laughing at me.’

‘No; but I should laugh if you went.’

‘But my mother is calling,’ she said weakly.

‘Then why not listen to me at once—get my story over and go to her?’

His audacity compelled her to obey even while it enraged her.

‘Go on,’ she said.

‘I want to answer your question first. You asked me why I deceived everybody, even the electors of this enlightened constituency. My answer is that my wife by her own desire does not go about. As my wife her record would belong to the public ; as my sister she is left in comparative peace. We don’t want the world to know her concerns, because she has a terrible habit to conceal, and can only do so in retirement.’

Joan set her teeth ; she longed to get away from this man and his story. She remained seated lest he should think her a coward.

‘My wife has a weak will—that’s her disease. But it shows itself in a horrible form ; she cannot resist drink.’

He was silent for a moment.

‘When I married her, she was a beautiful bright child of seventeen. Her life had been sordid, for it was spent in a sweater’s den ; but it was sunny enough to make that den a centre of light. As a baby, they gave her drink to taste. She hated the stuff ; they tried her again and again, but her taste rebelled. I saw

her first when she was sixteen years old, and she was singing over her work. The workshop was full of people, and they were unconscious of the influence of her presence. I was canvassing for a friend who desired to represent the district, and when I entered Madeline's particular hell I knew that I was in the company of an angel. I made her my friend, and in three months taught her to love me. Then the slack time came. She was afraid to own that she was hungry when we were together ; besides, we had so much to say to one another, and she was so happy in being able to deceive me. When I told her that she was getting pale she laughed at me for not being able to cure her of her only pain. She was lovesick, and I was her doctor and must prove to her my skill. The devils who belonged to her home offered her drink to satisfy her hunger. She took what they gave her, and when I came upon her one day in their company her face was like theirs. Well, I have little more to say. The poison entered her life ; I tried to make her resist drink by the strength of my love. I could not influence her while we lived apart, so I married her. She resisted her temptation for a few months ; then it was too

strong for her, and she fell. This story has repeated itself all through our married life. We have been married ten years. Each time she falls her fit of self-loathing affects her brain. I *must* save her from madness, and I *can* by my love. It's not the love that I gave her at the beginning—then her mind and her beauty inspired me ; then I looked up and adored ; now I look down and pity—but it's love all the same ; and the beauty of her tragedy is in her face, and it is the most exquisite face in the whole world for me.'

He was silent for a moment. Then he noticed his listener, and saw that she was very pale.

'Come, Miss Joan,' he said kindly, 'you must not be so sympathetic. Perhaps you are too young to hear my sad story.

'Please go on,' she said very softly.

'Well, I have only the last chapter and the moral to give you. Soon after my marriage, I discovered that Madeline was extremely musical, and I resolved to have her taught. I made her put her whole strength into her art, and she has been wonderfully successful. During the last few years she has learned that she has creative power. The triumph of that discovery

has given her a new hope. Before that, poor child! she loathed herself entirely. Now she finds that she has some spark to develop—some light to project on to the passage of time. The effect on her character is wonderful. Then, again, she knows that by her art she can win my respect. In her music she tells me of her great disappointment—how she had longed and prayed to be my wife and helpmate, and found herself utterly unworthy. But *now—now* at last, she has discovered something to give to my life—something which no one else has exactly in the way she has it ; something which would remain dead, unless she breathed upon it the breath of life ; something which is part of her soul, and without which her soul cannot itself. It belongs to her, and her alone ; but fulfil she can only secure it by courageous and sustained effort. If she fails, my life will be the poorer. It is the part of her life which Nature has left to her to make for herself. If she neglects her task, humanity will be cheated, and the claims of humanity compel her to work, even though she is quite unconscious of their influence. She does not ask to go out and about. She dare not ; but she knows that there is temptation even in her own two rooms.

She is tormented always, but she can resist her tormentors through her music. The consciousness of her power came too late. The disease had gone too far. So she is never entirely at peace—never!

His voice was rather husky as he spoke these last words.

‘And the moral?’ whispered Joan.

‘There are two: one a special one—that shall come first. The victims of the drink poison must, as far as possible, be kept away from temptation. Destroy the drink palaces or shut up those who would patronize them. None of the victims will hate you for your pains after the first rage of animal disappointment is soothed. Many of them will join with you in your efforts to help them. But you won’t help them merely by denying them the gratification of their vice. You must give them the opportunity to fulfil themselves. They have a passion which you are bound to crush, but they have other possessions which it is their privilege and duty to develop. Give them their chance. Now you understand my attitude towards the drink problem; I believe in local veto and in organized recreation; and, as I am a platform speaker, and as temperance

is my subject, you must forgive me for having talked to you as if you were at a public meeting.'

'And the general moral?' she asked, ignoring his apology.

'You know it. We have all got weak wills. If you hadn't, you would have found time to study, and would already have achieved something in art. If I hadn't, I should have been in Parliament. Yes, I think so,' he continued, noticing her look of surprise; 'I believe we can do anything—get anywhere—if we make our wills strong. The tragedy of this life is that villains generally achieve most, as they have the strongest wills. Guilt acts like a goad. Its equivalent in the sphere of art is the consciousness of creative power. This consciousness is even stronger than guilt in forcing us to achieve success. Find your work, Miss Joan, and stick to it, and you will see that you can do what you like with your life.'

'You think that we can only strengthen our will-power by concentrating it upon the right object?'

'Yes; upon the appropriation by our individual soul of some of the life outside itself which is necessary to its completion.'

‘ You don’t believe in any help from without —from God ?’

He gave an impatient shrug.

‘ Where was God in the story of Madeline’s life ?’ he asked. ‘ Tell me that if you can, and if you *can’t*, I need not answer your question.’

He looked at her almost in anger.

She answered his gaze fearlessly, and said, *very* quietly :

‘ I will answer you one day. I am not quite certain at this moment.’

He gave a short laugh.

‘ Well done, Miss Joan ; you put me down that time. Promise to tell me when you find out. Now, I should like to thank you for listening to me.’

They rose.

‘ Thank you for telling me,’ she said, taking his hand. ‘ Good-bye.’

‘ I spoke to you, Miss Joan, because I wanted your sympathy. You are the second woman who has made me feel that she can help a man merely by the beauty of her own character. I was disappointed once ; I don’t think I shall be this time.’

She let go his hand, blushed furiously, and walked hurriedly towards the house. He stood

watching her, feeling that this desire for sympathy enriched his life. He had tried to crush it for so long. So the world had found him conceited and dogmatic ; now Joan had given him back his birthright. He was no longer abnormal.



CHAPTER IX

THERE are moments in our lives when revelations are forced upon us with so much suddenness that their effect is paralyzing. We long to be alone until rest has restored to our brains their normal functions. As Joan walked rapidly towards the house, she was conscious of a chaos of ideas which she wanted to sort in order to be at peace. Richard Ellis had touched her by the pathos of his story ; he had repelled her by his brutal rudeness ; yet the description of his marriage had convinced her that he was capable of feeling gentle chivalry. Now she was experiencing the influence of his masterful temperament, and rebelliously criticising his arrogant self-righteousness. He humbled her by his plain speaking, yet his interest flattered her. She disliked his dogmas, yet she longed for his respect ; she was shocked by his agnostic philosophy, yet she envied

his self-reliance. She wanted to escape his influence, for she was afraid of it, yet she would not on any account have denied herself another conversation as soon as an opportunity presented itself. She knew that his opinions would survive any opposition which she had the courage to offer, yet she longed to formulate her own faith in order that she might hurl it at his negations as if to destroy them.

Joan's steps quickened while these thoughts whirled through her brain, frightening her by their many inconsistencies. But the quiet for which she longed was denied her. As she was about to enter the porch Harold passed her, looking at her menacingly. At first she dared not stop him, but when he had passed half across the lawn, she ran after him, and, touching his arm, asked what was the matter.

'Oh, nothing. I am coming back to lunch.'

'What has happened?'

'Nothing. Your influence is stronger than mine—that is all.'

'You need not talk in riddles.'

'Well, Millicent has allowed herself to weave a tragedy, and you have provided the material.'

'Harold, you may say what you like to me, of course, but if you had any sense of honour

you would find out the truth before you accused me of destroying Millicent's happiness.'

'Millicent has been refusing to marry me because she insists that I am only induced to do so by an excessive regard for honour.'

'Perhaps it is all used up.'

'Perhaps it is.'

'Harold, you are mistaken, and you *shall* listen to me. I admire Millicent's new strength but I have not encouraged her to use it. I have tried—— But what is the good of my talking to you?'

He laughed.

'All right!' she cried in a fit of anger, which she tried in vain to control. 'You may mock me now, but you will know the truth one day. No, I did not help Millicent to do what she has done; but I can applaud her now, and I *will*!'

Joan left Harold standing eyeing his boots rather foolishly.

She found Millicent picking roses in front of the house. She was singing a sweet lullaby over to herself. Joan watched her for a few moments.

'Why do you sing?' she asked at last, rather resentfully.

‘Why shouldn’t I, dear?’ asked Millicent, pressing her roses into the basket which swung from her arm.

‘Because it’s absurd to try to deceive people. You are unhappy.’

‘Are all songs happy, Joan?’

‘All those which you have learned.’

Millicent smiled.

‘I have found out to-day some songs which suit me very well. You can always sing the present into these dear old tunes of the past.’

‘Why did you refuse Harold?’

‘Because the man who marries me must marry me because he wants to, not because he ought. I don’t want a “duty” husband.’

‘Are you *sure* you are right about him?’

‘I am sure he is glad to be free—and I am sure I am too,’ she added, with a coquettish toss of her head, which impressed Joan less than might have been expected. She had noticed a little sob in Millicent’s voice.

‘I am sure, dear, you have meant to act for the best, but you are not quite just to Harold. He would have stopped away to-day if he did not love you so much.’

‘Poor boy!’ said Millicent patronizingly. ‘He was in a great muddle, but I have put him

straight. But I say, Joan, hadn't you better go in to auntie? She called you for quite a long time, and you never came.'

'Did she know where I was?'

'Yes, Harold told her. But he didn't do it on purpose,' she added hastily, seeing the expression of anger on Joan's face.

When Joan entered her mother's boudoir, she was relieved to find her father there.

'Do you want me, mother?' she asked.

'I did; but you were busy and wouldn't come.'

'You must forgive me, mother. I couldn't come at the moment when I heard you call.'

'I know that you were with that dreadful man. He has you in his power.'

The hot blood flew to Joan's face.

'He hasn't!' she said angrily. 'It's not true.'

'I don't blame you altogether,' added Mrs. Carey, glancing significantly at her husband.

'Everybody can see that he is entirely unscrupulous, and you are inexperienced.'

In a moment, all Joan's contradictory emotions marshalled themselves into line to make one strong protest against her mother's injustice. Whatever might have been the result of quiet

analysis, her mother's words made her the champion of Richard Ellis.

'You know nothing about him, mother!'

Mrs. Carey shrugged her shoulders.

'And you?'

'I know a great deal, and I *am certain* that he is a good man. He may not be smart or polished, but he is good, and strong, and true, and, and——'

'He has a persuasive tongue. All right, Joan; you must sing his praises another time, to a more sympathetic listener. Now you had better go and prepare for lunch.'

Joan left the room, shutting the door rather noisily.

'Now you see what you have done, George,' said Mrs. Carey, as soon as she was alone with her husband. 'Are you going to let Joan ruin herself completely, or are you going to inquire into this man's history, and then turn him out of your house?'

'My dear, if you really think so badly of Richard Ellis you should not indulge in such fierce opposition to Joan's friendship for him. If you took her interest as a matter of course, it would wear itself out, but your enmity urges her to try to defend him.'

‘I suppose I know my own daughter. She has some regard for me, although you——’

‘You are over-anxious, my dear. If Harold and Millicent come to terms at once, we shall leave this place in a few months. If they postpone the reconciliation, Millicent must go away for a change, and Joan will accompany her. So she will not have the opportunity——’

‘Richard Ellis is movable,’ said Margaret impatiently.

The luncheon-bell prevented, for the time being, further discussion. The meal passed off pleasantly enough. Millicent chatted gaily, and Harold and Mr. Carey supported her. But Joan, who was always desperately real, felt irritated by the affected cheerfulness of the party. She could not understand why people should take the trouble to pretend when they were round their own dining-room table and there was no audience to be deceived.

After lunch, Joan found her way to the lake, which was situated at the bottom of the lawn which sloped down from the house. She sat down on a rustic bench and looked abstractedly into the water. The tall trees on the island in front of her seemed to be smiling at their reflections; the ducks slid over the water, un-

perturbed by the weird clearness of their shadows nor by the innumerable flies which whirled and danced over their heads, apparently disregarding their occasional snaps. The lilies, in their glowing, tangled mass of white and gold, opened their petals wide to receive the sunlight. The scene whispered peace and hope in Joan's tired ears, as she lay back on her rustic seat, pulling at the branches which formed an arbour over her head. As she sat, she dreamed of a future so full of effort and success that it would even win the approval of Richard Ellis. If Millicent and Harold had married, it would have been easy enough for her to persuade her parents to come to London and allow her to receive a proper art training. Joan's whole being kindled with joyousness as she thought of the greatness this training would place within her reach. But, then, Millicent had refused to marry Harold. Must Joan, therefore, live out her life as she had begun it, using her strength up in impotent aspiration?

A quick step along the path made Joan look up with a start. Harold French was by her side. He had come in search of her.

'Hullo, Joan! I thought I should find you on this perch. I came to say that I am sorry

that I was rude to you this morning, and to ask you to forgive me.'

'It was kind of Millicent to send you.'

'Come, Joan! Will you never again have a kind word for me? Do I deserve that you should snub me like this?'

He sat down by her side, pulled a branch off the overhanging tree, and began beating the gravel with it.

'Have you seen Millicent again?'

'Yes; she is unconvinced, but she proved to me that you were not against me. I will have patience.'

'I give you my word, Harold, that I will write to you as soon as I see that your chance has come,' said Joan solemnly.

He came a little closer to her.

'Upon my word, Joan, you know how to help a fellow. I am not sure that I should have had the courage to ask for a promise like that.'

'I thought that was what you came for,' said Joan bitterly.

'No, I am honestly ashamed of my rudeness and injustice to you this morning; I came—for that—mostly.'

'Oh, *that* doesn't matter,' she said carelessly. Then, suddenly changing her tone, she added:

'Tell me *why* you are so terribly unjust to Richard Ellis.'

'I can't help that, Joan. The man is not fit to dust your boots; yet you allow him to pay you marked attention continually, and will not listen to your friends' advice in the matter.'

'I don't know what you mean by "marked attention." He interests me. He has taught me a lot.'

'That's the cruel pity of it. You believe in him, and he is entirely insincere, and has never done anything to justify him in having theories.'

'I thought you had finished with this kind of talk, when you came here this morning to ask Millicent to marry you in spite of everything.'

'You hit hard, Joan.'

'You shouldn't talk about what you don't understand. Mr. Ellis has had a terrible experience in his own life with his—wife, and you've no right——'

'What, Joan—you said *wife*! You don't mean to say——'

'Yes, I do; Mr. Ellis is living through a terrible tragedy, and has evolved his theories out of *that*. There, now I've told you, and I had no right to do so; but you made me mad.'

She jumped up, and he looked at her very humbly, for the hot, angry tears were coursing down her face.

‘I am sorry, Joan ; but how could I know?’

‘You found it so easy to be cruel and unjust,’ she said. ‘What is the use of being sorry now ? And to me ?’

Joan could not resist the self-indulgence, so delightful to a woman, of rubbing in contrition until her victim is conscious of a sore wound. But suddenly she gave a little start, and asked anxiously :

‘What was that, Harold ? I thought I heard a little sob.’

‘Yes ; there is someone on the island. Go to her, Joan. It’s your mother.’

Joan rubbed her eyes hard, then, stuffing her handkerchief into her pocket, prepared to cross the bridge leading to the island.

‘Mind, Harold,’ she called back over her shoulder, ‘you are not to tell a living soul—not even Millicent.’

Mrs. Carey was sitting on the uncomfortable bench placed in the centre of the island. She hardly looked up when Joan sat down next to her. She merely asked in a querulous voice, broken by a sob :

‘What is it, Joan?’

‘Nothing, mother; but I am so sorry to see you like this. Do tell me what has happened, dear! We were so happy once. We ought to be so happy now.’

‘You and father think me all that’s bad.’

‘How *can* you, mother?’

‘Yes, you do, and I am sure I don’t know why; but I don’t see the use of living now. I wish it was all over, and you had got rid of me.’

‘Mother, why do you talk in such a terrible way? It is you who have seemed so cross to father and me lately, and all we want is for us to be happy together.’

‘Of course, just what I expected. Put everything on me. It is so easy. Can’t you see that I have only been angry with you for your own good? I can’t see my own child ruin herself, and look on and smile. If your father is wilfully blind, it is my duty to try to make him see. All I get for my pains is that you both blame me, and look on me as a monster of cruelty. But I don’t care. I am tired of everything.’

‘But we *don’t*, mother,’ said Joan in a soothing voice, as if she were reasoning with a fractious child. ‘We know you have done

everything because you love us so much. But Millicent——'

'Well, what of her? Don't *I* love Millicent, too? Haven't I been as devoted to her as *any* mother could be. When she was an invalid, did not I spend my life for her? What has she to complain of?'

'I know you love her, and you have been very good to her, dear. It is only lately since she came out that something has happened to make you behave differently to her.'

'Yes, I know I made a mistake. I was angry with her, and I made her cry for a night or two. But the tears will pass away without ruining her eyes or her complexion. I heard her singing before I came out. Harold and she had a talk. They won't play at quarrelling much longer, and if I did say more than I meant the other night, it was only because I am never afraid of the truth. Millicent will be all the better for her few hours of pain. When she and Harold *do* come together again, they will have nothing to hide. They will be completely happy. I don't worry about *them*.'

'I hope they will be happy,' said Joan, rather solemnly.

'It will be their own fault if they are not.

She is pretty and rich, and she will have a good husband.'

'You are *sure* she will have him?'

'Of course, as soon as this pretty play is acted out.'

'And you are sure that Harold's original fears were not justified; you are *certain* that there is no harm in marrying?'

'Of course, I don't believe in that rubbish. I can't think what makes you mention it. You are not like other girls. Girls don't croak.'

'And I won't either, mother dear, if you will only forgive me for being ugly and poor, and for not marrying.'

'I don't see what you have got to look forward to,' said Mrs. Carey, relenting somewhat.

'I will tell you, mummy dear,' said Joan, seizing her opportunity eagerly. 'If we leave here, we shall go to London. I shall study to be a real artist, and we shall get to know heaps of interesting people. I shall be famous, and as happy as the day is long.'

'You have certainly got a good opinion of yourself, Joan,' said her mother, smiling in spite of herself.

'That's your fault, mummy. Oh, do let's

wipe out the pain of the last few weeks and try to make Millicent and Harold happy.'

'Why didn't Harold want to marry you?'

'Oh, mummy, don't go back to that. You see how he loves Millicent.'

'She is pretty. She is not worth half of you.'

Joan blushed.

'And you blame me for being conceited! Really, mummy, you are not fair.'

'All I can say is that I can't bear to think of you working. Why should you?'

'I shall *love* it, mother.'

'At first, of course. But what will happen when you are tired?'

Joan laughed, and her mother did not know how insincere the laugh was. She had just formulated a question which had troubled her child many and many a time, in spite of heroic efforts to stifle it. What would she do when she was tired? She would be alone. No living being would depend on her sufficiently to strengthen her to further effort, neither would anyone be there to sympathize with her weakness and bid her rest. She would be alone. Now she said convincingly :

'I shan't be tired, mummy. I shall have you

and father to look after me, and we shall all be happy together.'

Mrs. Carey sighed complacently. For the time, at least, her daughter's flattering suggestions soothed away her restlessness.

'You must do as you like, Joan. You will admit one day that I have always tried my best for you.'

'I admit it now, mother,' replied Joan. 'When Millicent marries we *shall* go to London, shan't we?'

'Of course, Joan; that was all arranged before the upset took place. This house belongs to Millicent's father, and George won't accept it from him. He always made up his mind to live near to Millicent when she married, but to be entirely independent of her. Of course, now he will want to look after this father of her's, but I am sure I don't know how he can. At any rate, till Millicent is settled we can't decide anything. Whatever happens, I know we shall have to live in a dreadfully small way. Your father does not mind being poor. He never touched half the money which was sent to him for maintaining this place. He allowed it to accumulate for Millicent, who had quite enough already. I can't understand his pride, but he

seems to enjoy it so much himself, that I suppose I have no right to complain of it.'

'I am perfectly satisfied, because we shall go to London,' Joan said emphatically; and then she began to paint glowing pictures of their own home-life under the new conditions, and of the delights of London in general.

'Yes, yes; it is all very well to talk of the pleasures of London. Most of them are only in reach of the rich people. You can't move out of doors there without spending money, and so you must stop at home a great deal. The rich and the poor are all right in London, but the "middling" people have to pretend to possess what they want and all the while go without it.'

'I don't see why we need envy other people.'

'I do. If the rich are not happy, they ought to be, and the poor have so much done for them, that they should be ashamed of themselves if they do not get on all right. As for *us*, who have to keep up appearances, I hope that there will be special provision for *us* in heaven. We get precious little pleasure on earth.'

Joan was afraid to answer lest she should irritate her mother by her arguments. Instead, she suggested that they should take a short walk

together by the river. Their conversation was so harmonious and pleasant that when, after about an hour had elapsed, they returned home, Margaret felt quite kindly disposed towards her family and its perversities.

Joan's attention was taken up during the remainder of the afternoon with Dick French, who had come over with his mother to have tea with the Careys. Mrs. French wished to talk over her son's relations with Millicent. So Dick was left to his own devices. Joan was a special favourite with the boy. He considered her game for anything, and therefore almost as useful a playmate as his own sister, who had had the advantage of his training and guidance. On this particular afternoon Dick invited Joan to come to the playroom and watch him perform ~~the~~ unsavoury operation of stuffing a pike, which had been caught in the lake and was to be preserved in the interests of amateur science. It was while her attention was being thus absorbed that a letter was brought to Joan. She glanced at its contents, and then asked in some agitation :

‘ Ellen, who brought this ? ’

‘ Mr. Ellis brought it himself, miss. ’

‘ Why did he not come in ? ’

‘I asked Mr. Ellis to come in, miss, but he said he only wished to leave the note.’

Ellen spoke in that peculiarly decorous voice which domestics use towards us when they see us on the verge of ‘forgetting ourselves’ by over-excitement. She knew that there was ‘something up’ with ‘Miss Joan,’ but it was not her place to recognise unusual emotion. *Her* dignity at least must remain intact for the good of the house. Joan read the letter a second time, and then left the room unceremoniously, banging the door.

‘Hullo, Joan!’ called Master Dick, without moving from his chair; ‘what’s up?’ As he received no answer, he told himself that if he got up to look after Joan the whole inside of the fish would be spoilt; so he wisely resolved to wait till his delicate task was completed. ‘Girls’ things *keep*,’ he said meditatively. In that they certainly had the advantage over the insides of pikes.

Joan took her letter up to her bedroom and read again :

‘DEAR MISS CAREY,

‘This is to wish you good-bye; I trusted you with my confidence. You betrayed me.

We cannot remain friends. I had intended to tell you to-morrow that I purpose to take my wife to Germany shortly for a long course of study. She will have music lessons, and I shall occupy myself with literary work. I shall not trouble you with further details of my plans.

‘RICHARD ELLIS.’

Joan sat on the edge of her bed feeling as if she would choke with rage and remorse; at length she crumpled up the letter in her hand and vowed that she did not care. After a while she went to the writing-table and sat down to send off a reply to Mr. Ellis. Thus she hoped to find relief. She wasted a great many sheets of notepaper before she wrote :

‘DEAR MR. ELLIS,

‘You are unjust to me. I have not betrayed you. Harold accused you of being a theorist, and I told him that you had had a tragedy in your own life, and that this trouble had suggested to you your life’s work. I did not mean any harm. I should not have been your friend if I had sat still and let him say what he liked. One day you will be sorry for

your unkindness. Now you can think as you like about me.

‘JOAN CAREY.

‘P.S.—I did say you were married. That was all. I *had* to say that.’

Joan sealed up her letter, and took it to the letter-box which stood on the hall table ; then she felt less angry and more remorseful, and in this mood returned to the playroom to view Dick’s scientific triumph. But she was very restless, and before the letters were finally taken to the village she had paid several visits to the hall and drawn her note frequently out of the box and examined the envelope. Then she had stuffed the letter back into the box, and looked round anxiously to see if anybody had seen her action.

After Mrs. French and Dick had left, the house seemed curiously silent, and Joan felt for a time miserably depressed. But just before the dinner-hour she roused herself. She determined that Richard Ellis’ farewell should not distress her, since she did not care for his good opinion. He had shown himself in his true character by judging her so harshly. She would defy him, and heal her wounded pride by

her gaiety. So during dinner, while Eric Frankland's company seemed to depress her father and mother, and Millicent sat thinking of Harold and sadly missing his bright presence, Joan laughed and talked as if her good spirits were almost beyond her control. She appeared quite unconscious of the colourless eyes which Eric Frankland fixed on Millicent, frightening her with the intensity of their passion. She tried to start one lively discussion after another with her mother, and never seemed to notice that she received very little encouragement. After dinner she took a few rapid sketches of Millicent, and was unusually successful in her efforts. She insisted on making the party join in some guessing games, and so relieve the tension of their feelings. Throughout the whole evening she was unconscious of all else but the amusement of the hour.

It was only later, in the darkness of her own bedroom—that darkness which reveals our Holy of Holies to our inner consciousness—that Joan realized that her talks with Richard Ellis had satisfied the natural craving for excitement which exists in all young hearts. Then she knew that she was terribly sorry to have parted with him for ever. She had felt

glad when he had sought her friendship ; now that he despised her she pitied herself as a poor thing. Why had she told Harold ? Why had he spoken to Ellis on the matter ? Had he hoped thus to make amends for his former prejudice ? How had Ellis taken his advances ? Joan pressed her chin into her pillow as these unanswerable questions whirled through her head. She told herself that she would not think any more about a man whom she could never really respect. But in spite of her wise resolutions, she thought unceasingly of Richard Ellis.



CHAPTER X

JOAN came to know many months later that Harold had met Ellis soon after their talk by the lake on that July afternoon, and in a fit of remorse had felt impelled to ask the other's forgiveness for his former hasty judgment. She never told Harold of Ellis' wrath at the supposed betrayal of his confidence.

A few days after she received Ellis' letter of farewell she accompanied her friend on a round of visits which were intended to restore Millicent to her normal cheerfulness, and, by removing some of her morbid fancies, make it possible for her to accept Harold's offer of marriage. But weeks had passed away, and Harold's letters remained unanswered; Millicent hardly mentioned his name even to her friend. She appeared to be enjoying the gaieties of every house-party to which she was introduced. Her popularity was as great

as ever, and the mystery attached to her broken engagement added piquancy to her society. Joan looked on sometimes in amazement, as she saw Millicent accepting attentions as if they were her right, and scattering her smiles as if absolutely ignorant of their inflammatory power. She occasionally felt irritated by her friend's carelessness, but the irritation was never more than momentary. Millicent's charm worked more potently on Joan than on any other of her victims, and paralyzed her critical faculty completely.

At last the girls found themselves staying with an old friend of the Careys in a small Surrey village. They were having a fortnight's rest before joining a large and brilliant gathering at a neighbouring country house, where Millicent was to take part in some private ~~the~~atricals. Joan was enjoying this week most thoroughly. Her hostess, a maiden lady of advanced age, whose heart was young enough to enter into every form of girlish happiness, was devoted to both girls, and seemed to understand their characters thoroughly. She was able to fuss over Millicent with all the little attentions which had become necessary to the girl's happiness. She sympathized with

Joan in her desire to paint, and never expected her to come home to meals when she started on one of her sketching expeditions.

After Joan had been staying a few days with Miss Maxley, she made an acquaintance which was destined to become a potent influence in her life. It happened one evening that she was sitting in a field trying to paint a hay-cart upon which a boy in a brick-red coat was lying asleep. The evening sun sent a beautiful soft light on the scene in front of her, refining the outlines of the trees and cart and spiritualizing the rustic's face.

Joan was intensely happy and absorbed. Suddenly she looked up and saw a little figure standing a few yards from her, and sketching vigorously on a small block which she held stretched out in front of her. She was such a tiny being that at first Joan was not quite sure whether she was a woman or a child. She cast many furtive glances in the direction of her fellow-artist, and wished that she would turn right round and come to speak to her.

At last Joan managed to concentrate her attention again on her own work. Suddenly she heard an angry exclamation, and, looking up, saw the little lady fling her block some few feet

in front of her and sink down on the ground, clasping her hands with a despairing gesture which was rather fascinating.

Joan forgot her shyness and approached the artist.

'Is anything the matter?' she asked, with an amused smile.

The artist turned round, and Joan saw a thin, hungry little face, with piercing black eyes, rather sunken cheeks, a sensitive mouth, a straight, delicate nose and a white forehead framed with iron-gray curls. The little woman must have been middle-aged, but her figure was extremely small and delicate. Joan had never imagined that a dwarf could be so attractive. She was dressed in a tight-fitting gray nuns-veiling dress, and she wore no hat.

'My water-supply has given out,' she said, and Joan noticed that her accent was slightly foreign.

'Is that all? I am so glad, for I can lend you some water.'

Joan ran back to her easel, picked up her water receptacle from the ground, and returned to the stranger. The little woman gave her a sweet, bright smile of thanks, and as soon as possible picked up her work and started afresh. For the sake of appearances at least

Joan felt obliged to return to her canvas, but she was much interested in her fellow-artist, and would have liked to remain and watch her work.

After a few moments the boy who had been sleeping in a picturesque pose on the hay-cart got up and stretched himself. Hardly had Joan realized that the completion of her picture was menaced before she caught sight of a small figure standing next to the hay-cart, and talking rapidly to the ungainly youth who stood stretching himself on the top. Without much delay the boy yielded to the entreaties made in an eager voice by the little lady, who stood with her hands clasped behind her, while her fingers nervously played together. The artist ran back to her work as soon as her request was granted. As she tripped along the grass she looked for all the world like a little bird.

Joan became once more absorbed in her own painting. Suddenly she was roused by a voice at her elbow.

‘You have got the soft light—bravo!’

Joan looked up and smiled gratefully. There was much appreciation in the criticism, and appreciation was very sweet to Joan.

‘May I see your work too?’ she asked.

‘In a minute ; but that boy will move directly, and you want some more time for that cart-wheel.’

Joan worked industriously for a short time, and did not feel disconcerted by the kind eyes of the stranger, which were fixed on her canvas. Then, unfortunately, the farmer appeared out of the neighbouring field, and spoke to the boy sharply for delaying so long.

‘He obliged us,’ said the little artist in a conciliatory voice.

‘E ’ad no business—got my work to do.’

The little lady deliberately drew out her sketch, and, approaching the irate farmer, insisted on his inspecting her work. Joan could not quite understand the exclamation which he gave forth, but she certainly did not recognise any note of admiration in it. She was therefore surprised to see, a few moments later, the farmer standing with his hat in his hand, and a big smile decorating his massive red face. He was being sketched by the little artist, who stood a few feet away from him with her block held out in front of her.

This pencil portrait was an unqualified success, and the farmer received it as a peace-offering, and walked home behind the boy and

the cart, proud of the 'artist picture stuff,' which he was about to show his missus.

The little woman's water-colour sketch was soft and pleasant in tone, and Joan admired it enthusiastically.

'Which way do you go home?' she asked the stranger, as she put up her easel.

The little lady nodded in the direction taken by the farmer.

'I lodge with him,' she said.

'Have you been here long?'

'Since Friday—to-day is Monday. I go back to work to-morrow in London.'

Joan longed to ask what the work was, but she dared not appear too inquisitive.

'Are you going to study?' asked the stranger, after a pause.

Joan blushed slightly.

'When I get the chance.'

The little woman laughed a musical laugh.

'Don't wait too long,' she said. 'You may do something if you work.'

'Where did you study?' asked Joan.

'At home. My brother is an artist; he helped me—but I don't paint.'

Joan looked up sharply.

'No,' said the little woman emphatically,

‘Estelle Melline does not pretend to paint. Painting is not a Friday to Tuesday occupation—painting is a life. Estelle Melline designs trimmings for fashionable ladies’ frocks.’

‘What a pity!’ said Joan, with intense sympathy.

The little woman shrugged her shoulders and laughed carelessly.

‘I thought so once,’ she said. ‘After a bit things leave off hurting.’

‘That must be the worst pain of all,’ said Joan; and Estelle Melline seemed to understand her rather enigmatic words, for she took Joan’s hand impulsively and gave it a little squeeze.

‘Do you work very hard?’ asked Joan.

‘Oh yes, when I can. In the season they give me plenty to do.’

‘But when you have less to do you can paint.’

‘Yes; but it’s no use. I must eat.’

‘And your brother?’

‘He is in Paris.’

‘Is he *very* celebrated?’

‘Not if you don’t know of him,’ said Estelle.

‘Do you know him?’ she added naïvely.

‘No; but I know nothing about art or artists. I expect he *is* famous.’

‘No, Ernest will never be what you English call famous. People don’t understand him. He is too far in front.’

‘Are you quite French?’

‘Quite, quite,’ said the little woman.

‘You speak English——’

‘As if I had lived here all my life. So I have, my dear, but if I could go back to-morrow, go I would.’

‘Why?’ asked Joan curiously.

‘To find Ernest.’

Joan did not know how to formulate the next question.

‘That is my house,’ said Estelle, pointing to the farm on her right.

‘Oh, I am staying half a mile further,’ Joan said in a disappointed voice. ‘Won’t you walk with me?’

‘And come back the half-mile again?’ asked Estelle in a voice of well-feigned horror.

‘Oh, I am sorry if you don’t like walking.’

Estelle laughed.

‘I’ll come,’ she said. ‘You like my story? It is different from many. You want to hear more?’

‘I fear I have been already terribly curious,’ said Joan humbly.

The little stranger shrugged her shoulders.

‘Women’s stories are so much the same nowadays. We try, struggle, weep. What will you have?’

‘I want them to have success.’

‘You are very young.’

Joan blushed.

‘Nothing to be ashamed of, my dear. I was young, too, once.’

‘And you wanted success?’

Estelle laughed.

‘Yes, I wanted success,’ she said softly. ‘At least, for Ernest.’

‘Will you tell me why Ernest went away?’

‘No; that is Ernest’s story. I will tell you mine.’

‘Oh, thank you!’ said Joan warmly.

‘What a strange child it is!’ said Estelle. ‘I can only give you a few words, show you the setting; but the life, that you must find out by living. There were just we two, Ernest and I. We had a mother, I suppose, but we never knew her. Our father was everything in turn, but nothing for long. He was poet and painter, also teacher of literature and painting, and other things besides. When he wanted bread for Ernest and me, he did a little work in the riding-

school, a little in a restaurant, a little on the stage. He was all over the place, and sometimes he got a salary and sometimes he didn't, and Ernest and I were so accommodating. We were wonderful children. I think we *liked* being hungry; we never cried. We accepted the many changes in our lives, and I suppose they amused us. Then father died, and Ernest worked for me. He was fourteen and I was ten. But Ernest did not like work and we were often hungry. Then he taught me to paint, and I minded nothing unless he was cross. Then an Irish priest found us. He was good, but, oh, so strict! He tried to get us apart. He whipped us when we ran away from the homes he found for us in order to be together. When Ernest knew that he had whipped me, he nearly killed him. He was a little fury, but he never let anybody touch me. He only struck me three times himself, and that was before father died. It was always on my birthday that he got so angry. Ernest measured me on my birthdays and found I did not grow. He was mad then with disappointment, and hit me to relieve himself. Do I weary you?

‘No, no; go on,’ said Joan eagerly.

‘There isn’t much more of my story—most

belongs to Ernest. The priest put us to live with Aunt Lisette, an old woman who had lived with a Sisterhood all her life, and knew every kind of lace-work and designing. She taught me all she knew. She loved me, and she died when I was eighteen. Then I had only Ernest. They tried to make him work at one thing after the other. He was lazy. He would only paint. So they let him be. He tried to sell my work for me, and when he did we had enough to eat, and when he failed we laughed. There was nothing else to do. Now, as to the rest, when Ernest tells you his story, you will hear how he got his studies, and how he learned till he became the splendid artist he is. I must leave all that to him ; I can only say he went to Paris because he loved a woman. I have been alone since.'

'How long ago?' asked Joan.

'Fifteen years. I am not forty yet, though I look so old. I hope looking old won't kill me. I must live till Ernest comes back. I feel young—quite young still.'

'Does he write?'

'No; I was angry with the woman. He doesn't write. Ernest never liked letters.'

Joan looked down and saw that the black

eyes were full of tears, but a smile of sweet tenderness played about the sensitive lips.

‘And how did you manage to get your custom?’

Estelle gave the little shrug which was already familiar to Joan.

‘I suit them. I have a room near their grand shops. I design for them anything they like, and while customers wait I do what they want, and they like original work on their dresses.’

‘Are you not lonely?’

‘A little ; but till Ernest comes I could not be gay anyhow, and when I want a change I run away for a few days and stay in a farm, breathe the country air and paint. That’s what Ernest liked. Perhaps he will meet me one day in a field sketching : he would like that ; it would be dramatic.’

‘Will you tell me where you live in London, and may I come to see you if we are ever there?’ asked Joan eagerly.

‘Certainly, with pleasure,’ said Estelle, drawing a card out of her purse ; ‘that’s my name and address, and you will see what I can do. It is written on the back for the trade. Good-bye, my dear ; I must really

go back now. Why, I haven't asked your name——'

'My name is Joan Carey, and I live——'

'Oh, never mind. You come and see Estelle Melline.' Then she added gently, 'You see, I am old; that's why I haven't asked for your story. I am weary of the settings which show all these lives up to the world. I am interested in *you*—*you* yourself—but I don't care for the rest. I like talking to you, and I want you to study. You *will*?'

The black eyes flashed a fire which Joan had not noticed before. The little head was rather on one side. Estelle was waiting for Joan's reply.

'If I can.'

'Oh,' said Estelle impatiently, 'you *must*—you *must*! Ernest did. Anybody can who *will*. Good-bye!'

The little figure hurried back across the greeting to the girl, who stood watching her fields. Estelle stopped and waved a farewell till she was out of sight. Then Joan hurried home.

'I have had *such* a day,' she said, bursting into the bedroom where Millicent was dressing for dinner. She surprised a few tears on her

friend's cheeks. 'Why, what is the matter, dearest?'

'Nothing—nothing——'

'I *must* know,' said Joan.

'It's only that terrible Clive Harland whom we met the other day. He has written to propose ; and, oh, I *am* so tired of it all!'

'But why do you let them do it, dearest? Why do you encourage them such a lot? Of course, they believe in you.'

'I don't encourage them, and you have no right to say so. Oh, Joan, if you only knew how difficult it is—I mean how difficult it is to be friends, just friends and nothing more! We get on splendidly for a time, and then this always happens ; I can't stand it any more! It frightens me. I can't bear saying No so often.'

'Then why don't you say Yes?'

'To Clive Harland?'

'No, to Harold French.'

'You know I can't. Why do you tease me like this?'

'I know you can! Father only wrote to me yesterday to know why you delayed so long ; and really, Millicent, I couldn't tell him if I would. You mystify me ; you seem to be enjoying yourself.'

‘Joan, how can you be so cruel?’

Joan drew Millicent next to her on to her bed.

‘Tell me the truth, dearest. Do you love Harold?’

Millicent tried to pull her hands away; Joan made her impatient.

‘Tell me!’

‘You know.’

‘As much as ever?’

‘More.’

‘If he came to-night to ask you to marry him, would you refuse?’

‘You know why I refused; it was for his sake.’

‘Then you must accept for his sake. His life is broken without you. You must mend it, or he will go all to pieces. Do you know, Millicent, I thought you had forgotten him?’

‘And you are my friend. Joan, how could you?’

‘If I loved anybody he would be *always* there—always, and I could not play about with other people.’

‘You are never anybody else but yourself, Joan, and so you can’t understand me. If I had been myself these last weeks I should have been utterly wretched; I think I should have

gone mad. I acted the part of enjoying myself, and sometimes, for one evening or so, it seemed real enough. Then the miserable worry and restlessness came back—and, oh, this love-making, you don't know how it gets on one's nerves after a bit !

'No, I don't,' said Joan emphatically.

'Well, it does ; very few of the men mean it, and they frighten me by pretending. If I • could only marry and have done with it all !

'We want you to marry.'

'But are you not *afraid*, Joan ?

'No, dearest, no. Come, put these thoughts away from you for ever.'

Joan saw a look of terror in her friend's eyes, a look which was to become familiar to those who loved her.

'But is it *right* to put them away ?

'Yes, dearest. God did not mock us when He made you pure, beautiful, and good ; He *meant* it, and you must remember that, and rest and be at peace.'

'If Harold could only persuade me that he is marrying me for his own sake, and not just because he asked me long ago, before he knew anything about me, I should be *perfectly* happy, and never worry any more.'

‘ Well, dear, I am not a man, and so, perhaps, the obvious is less difficult for me to argue about than it is for Harold ; but even if I were Harold I should, I think, manage to convince you, more especially if that was the only way of making you my wife.’

That evening Joan wrote to Harold a friendly little note suggesting that he should procure an invitation to come and see Millicent act at Wendoling Hall.

And Millicent never acted so well as she did that night, when she caught sight of Harold in the back row of her audience. And Millicent never looked so lovely as she did on the succeeding day, when she received congratulations on her renewed engagement.

And Joan, too, slept so well that night, for her dreams were of London and painting, and they were interwoven with romance suggested by the personality of Estelle Melline.

CHAPTER XI

It was the morning of Millicent's wedding. The bride was in her room, resting before the final effort of putting on her dress.

Joan stood with her back to the window, talking cheerily, and at the same time trying to still a certain excitement which was in her own heart. Old Nana was bustling about the room. She had refused to recognise the claims of the 'young lady's maid,' and had insisted on coming herself that morning to dress 'Miss Millicent.'

'I do hope father will do his part all right,' said Millicent suddenly.

It was not the first time that she had expressed this hope, and not the first time that Joan had tried to reassure her.

'Why, of course ; don't worry any more about that. He has only to walk down the church and stand next to you. Nothing can go wrong with that.'

‘Everybody stares so at a wedding.’

‘And lucky they are that they have got you to stare at, my dear,’ interrupted Nana.

Millicent called Joan to her, and said in rather a strained voice :

‘I shall be glad when this is all over ; you don’t know what a comfort it is to think we shan’t return to these parts. In London, where people have so much to do, they won’t look at him as they do here, will they, Joan ?’

‘Of course not ; and, besides, very likely he will get better, dear ! You must always hope for that.’

‘I do—I do ! But, Joan, when it *does* happen like last night—oh, isn’t it awful ? And think what suffering it will mean to Harold.’

‘It is harder for you to bear.’

‘In a way—because I am his child, and must share his shame. Perhaps, too, as his child, I can understand better——’ She stopped abruptly, shuddering at the sound of her own words.

‘Millicent, darling,’ said Joan, putting her arm caressingly round her friend, ‘you must put away sad thoughts now. People *will* talk if you don’t look your own joyous self to-day ; and what’s the use of being beautiful if you put on a solemn face on your special day of days ?’

‘Quite right, Miss Joan,’ said Nana, who had been busying herself by the dressing-table, pretending not to hear the girls’ conversation, but betraying herself every now and then by an impatient little cough. Now she stood up in front of Millicent, and said emphatically: ‘I’ve no patience with folks who mind folks’ talk when they speak ill-natured. All people can say about you, Miss Milly dear, is that you are an angel, and that you have got an angel’s face, and that young Mr. French is a lucky gentleman to have you as his wedded wife. If folks say that, they will be speaking the truth, and you may listen to them. If they speak different, it’ll be because they are jealous; and I don’t wonder at them. Bless you! don’t we know that every bride who is taken home from the front of the altar, here, there, and everywhere, brings some baggage into the new home? Besides, God Almighty has got to grow some ill weeds; else we shouldn’t know a flower when we see it. Our young gentleman is lucky, because he has got the purest and most beautiful flower in the kingdom, and the weeds can’t touch it.’

‘Can’t even affect the roots?’ asked Millicent, smiling at the old woman’s vehemence.

‘There is nothing of the weed about you, Miss Milly dear, and anybody with eyes must see that. Now, come; if you don’t brighten up this minute, I will go away from you on your wedding morning, and not help you with your dress or anything.’

‘All right, Nana, I will be good. Just leave me and Miss Joan together for a few minutes, while you go and see what auntie is doing.’

‘Very well, miss; I’ll leave you to your two selves, though you need never mind me if you want to talk.’

Millicent sprang up and kissed Nana to make amends for the momentary offence which she had given.

‘There, there, I expect I am jealous, like the rest,’ said Nana, as she went out of the room; but the sweetness of Millicent’s kiss showed itself on her face as she went downstairs, smiling to herself over the happiness which had come to the house which she loved so deeply.

‘Joan, dearest, you will always take care of me?’ said Millicent suddenly, while she fixed her blue eyes eagerly on her friend’s face.

‘My dear, what will Harold say if I interfere with the peculiar privileges of his office?’

‘ I shall always need you, Joan—always.’

‘ Married people don’t seem to need their girl friends much as a rule.’

‘ Then their friends are not like you, Joan.’

Joan kissed her affectionately.

‘ I shall always be there when you want me,’ she said ; ‘ I shall never change.’

‘ And, dear, you must *always* get on with Harold. Since we have been engaged I don’t think things have been quite right between you. Once upon a time you were offended because he was cross with you on account of your friendship with Richard Ellis. But you got rid of him months ago, before we went away. You won’t tell us how you managed it, but he never comes near us now.’

‘ Mr. Ellis has gone abroad.’

‘ Well, whatever the reason is, he does keep away. So I can’t think what there can be between you and Harold.’

‘ Well, darling, whatever there is will disappear as soon as he is your husband.’

‘ Will it really, Joan ?’

‘ Of course—of course. He loves you absolutely, and he must get on with those whom you love. He can’t help himself.’

‘ Yes ; it *is* wonderful to be loved as he loves

me,' said Millicent, with a deep sigh of satisfaction. 'When he talks to me I feel perfectly happy, and I *know* that I am happy, and that nothing else in the world matters.'

'Yes, yes, dear,' said Joan, pressing her friend closely to her. 'I understand—and I am so glad.'

'Even father, even my trouble about father, doesn't seem to matter. Nothing, *nothing* matters except his love. This love will go on, won't it, Joan? He can never care for me less?'

She asked her questions anxiously.

Joan pressed her hand reassuringly.

'What was that?' asked Millicent suddenly.

'What, dear?'

'I thought I heard a knock at the door, or somebody fumbling.'

'It was a fairy of happiness, Millicent, and she'll come in without ever troubling to open the door.'

Millicent laughed; then, in an anxious voice she said:

'I don't know why, dearest, but my happiness is so great that it frightens me sometimes. Have you ever felt as happy as that, Joan?'

'No, darling, I don't think I have', answered

Joan in rather a strained voice ; 'but people do in books.'

'And does anything happen when they do, Joan? Does anything happen?'

Once more the beautiful blue eyes were fixed appealingly on Joan's face.

'You dear silly!' said Joan ; 'you must get rid of these fancies, because they are wrong. God made you for happiness, Millicent, and you must be happy. These little worries only come because you are excited. Just be thankful for what you have got and leave the future to God. So many people are praying for you to-day, Millicent ; your happiness means so much to us all. Promise me, dear, that you won't dwell on these fancies any longer.'

'All right, dear. You *are* wonderful ; you have made me feel again that everything is right, and smooth, and beautiful. Oh, Joan, there *was* a knock !'

'I expect it was Nana. She thinks it is time for you to dress. Come in, Nana !'

'May I come in?' asked a hesitating voice at the door. It was a man's voice.

'It's your father, Millicent. What shall I tell him?' asked Joan, standing up.

Poor Millicent's face became troubled.

‘He wants to explain away yesterday. Oh, Joan, if it isn’t wrong, don’t let him come in if you can prevent him.’

Joan went to the door.

‘It’s not you I want,’ said Eric Frankland in a plaintive voice ; ‘it’s my little girl. I want to see her before she has finished dressing. I want to see her alone. I have got a present for her. It’s her wedding-day. Tell her I want to speak to her.’

‘She ought to get dressed, Mr. Frankland. Won’t you wait till she comes down?’

He rattled the door handle impatiently.

‘Millicent!’ he cried, ignoring Joan’s protest. ‘You don’t hear me, Millicent! I must come in. Come here, child!’

In a moment Millicent stood beside her friend at the open door.

‘Ah!’ said Eric Frankland, feasting his eyes on his daughter’s face, and giving a long sigh of appreciation. ‘I knew my little girl would not refuse me, and on her wedding-day too.’ Then, looking at Joan suspiciously, he added : ‘I want to see her alone.’

‘I’ll be back in five minutes, darling,’ whispered Joan, and left the room to make way for the father to enter.

‘My little girl did not want me,’ began Eric Frankland in a whining voice, which was peculiarly disagreeable.

‘Well, I thought I should dress first, father ; that was all.’

‘It is right that we should have a few minutes’ private talk before you go downstairs. You are quite happy, my child ? Tell me that first.’

He took her hand, and Millicent had some difficulty in preventing herself from flinching.

‘I want to think of you as well cared for,’ continued Eric, without waiting for her reply. ‘That has been my one desire through life.’

He paused a moment, and mumbled these words over to himself several times. Then he said abruptly :

‘I have in this case some jewels which I wish you to wear to-day. They belonged to your mother.’

He drew a small case from his pocket and placed it in her hand. She opened it with trembling fingers.

‘They *are* beautiful!’ she said, taking the pearl ornaments out of the case and looking at them with beaming eyes. ‘It was nice of you to bring them to me to-day.’

‘It was only right, my child.’

‘Tell me about my mother who wore them.’

‘She was very beautiful. That is all I have to tell you.’

‘And was she happy, too, father?’ asked Millicent, with pathetic yearning.

‘I might have made her more happy, my dear, I think.’

She looked at him, and there was love as well as pity in her eyes. He patted her flushed cheek.

‘I must leave you now to put on your dress,’ he said, rising. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, he said: ‘You may have been surprised at my disappearance yesterday from the party given in your honour. I want to explain that I was called away on pressing business, and no personal considerations could be allowed to stand in the way of my duty.’

He delivered himself of this grandiose speech after the manner of a child who has just learned to speak, and expects the encouraging approval of his elders. Then he looked at Millicent, anxiously hoping that she was impressed by his explanation—that he had deceived her effectually. His lips trembled as he tried to assume a smile which was meant to be paternal. His real relation towards the beautiful girl in front of him was that of a miserable suppliant, imploring the respect and love which he knew

he did not deserve. She alone of all the world was able to make this man, her father, wish that his shame was not so palpable. Self regeneration seemed, of course, an impossible price to pay for her love. Instead he hoped to deceive her, so that she might care for him in spite of herself. As a matter of fact, Millicent knew quite well why her father was shuffled up to his room on the previous evening just as the guests were arriving. She was even aware that some of them must have met him in the drive and heard his awful singing. Further, she knew that he had escaped from his room later in the night, and had been brought from the village inn in such a state that Mr. Carey had to be summoned out of the drawing-room to assist the servants in removing their master from the hall. Nevertheless, although Millicent knew all this, and hated her father's miserable excuses, she, too, found some relief in their shelter ; her pride had no other refuge. So she pretended to take her father seriously, and said in a voice which sounded unnatural to herself :

‘Yes, I was sorry you had to go out last night ; but I expect the guests understood your reasons and were not offended.’

He drew a long sigh of relief, and kissed her

again and again, but she tried to pull herself away from his kisses, for they scorched her.

'Father dear, you'll untidy my hair,' she managed at last to say playfully.

At that moment Joan returned, and Eric Frankland felt constrained to leave the room, although there was an ugly scowl on his face as he did so. Millicent threw herself into her friend's arms, sobbing :

'Joan, it's more than I can bear. It's too horrible for anything!'

There was another tap at the door.

'What is that?' said Joan crossly. 'I really won't allow you to be bothered any more. It is getting quite late, and you won't be fit to be seen.'

'It's your father, Joan!' cried a cheery voice at the door; 'but don't let him in if you had rather not.'

'Let him in, Joan—do!' said Millicent, brightening up at once.

She felt that a few moments with George Carey would wipe out the horror of the last interview.

'Father dear, you must only stop one minute; she is getting tired,' whispered Joan, as she opened the door.

'All right; there is still a good hour before

we go to church, but I will, of course, obey your orders, madam.'

Millicent came forward holding out both hands to her visitor.

'It is good of you to come in for a little chat, Uncle George,' she said, smiling through her tears.

'Why, Millicent, you have been crying! Joan, how could you have allowed this?' he asked, playfully scolding. '*I* should have superintended the dressing. You're a failure.'

'It's not Joan's fault, uncle dear,' said Millicent, drawing him on to the sofa by her side, and placing her delicate hand in his strong one; 'Joan has been an angel. Father has been here.'

George Carey exchanged glances with his daughter.

'Yes, he's all right to-day,' said Millicent feebly; 'but—but—I know it is wrong of me—but I can't forget yesterday, and he wants me to pretend, and it's so *horrible*.'

She shuddered.

'I am sorry for you, dear child,' said Mr. Carey, with great tenderness, 'and sorry for poor Eric. It is so hard for him to know his own beastliness, and yet to long for your love.'

'But, uncle, why must he go on like this?'

‘The habit is deeply rooted. Nevertheless, I think if he felt quite sure of your love he might have a chance to keep straight. It’s only a fancy of mine, and you must take it for what it is worth ; but I can’t help believing that if he had actually known the happiness of being loved by a pure, good woman, he might control his passions in order to preserve that love. If he felt *certain* that in spite of his weakness you loved him deeply, he might learn to live for that love, and nothing else in the world would have power over him. You see, he has always had an unsatisfied yearning for love ; he got very little as a child, and rather less when he married. He took to this cursed drink to make him forget his disappointment. Now he would like to make *you* love him, but the mere possibility of such a joy is not enough incentive for him, for he is weak and his self-respect is about dead. He must have certainty, Millicent ; that alone can help him.’

The girl’s face wore an absorbed expression. A light seemed to radiate from her eyes, and her white skin shone with a whiteness which was hardly earthly.

‘I will try,’ she said at last, very solemnly.

A long silence followed. The God who

heard Millicent's vow made His presence felt more strongly than ever before on the three occupants of that simple room. There was an expression of cheerful courage on Millicent's face, when at last she said :

'Thank you, Uncle George, for coming to see me before the wedding. When, this afternoon, I promise to give myself to Harold, you and Joan will know that I am promising something else for my father, and if the second promise is blessed, I am sure the first will be also.'

George Carey pressed the little hand which was resting in his while Millicent spoke. Then he said abruptly :

'I must take myself off now ; there is Joan staring at me like a veritable dragon.'

His voice was husky in spite of the cheerfulness of its tone.

'One needs to be a dragon if one has Millicent to look after,' said Joan.

'God bless you, my child!' said George Carey, kissing Millicent ; 'and you, too, my own Joan.'

'I am quite happy now, darling,' said Millicent. 'Now you both go away, and, Joan, you call Nana, and I will soon be ready.'

* * * * *

It was a very tired Joan who stood, some ten hours later, by the open window of her bedroom staring up into the heavens gemmed with millions of brilliant stars. As she stood receiving the cool night breezes on her face and neck with keen enjoyment, she thought over the events of the day, and her heart was full of longing, pity, wonder, and dread. Did those stars twinkling up there so wisely know what was in store for her beloved Millicent? Could they tell what had been the meaning of that look of triumph on the bride's face as she walked up the church on the arm of her father, whom she knew to be the object of scorn to that large gathering of well-dressed friends? Joan thought she understood that look, for she knew that it had come to Millicent because she was determined to try to save her father by her love. This resolution had transformed for Millicent the miserable debauched being who had returned so inopportunately to cast a shadow over her young life. She exulted, as women always exult, because she felt that another's happiness depended on her love. Her father's salvation had become one of the chief purposes in her own life; it would be one of the beautiful flowers which would blossom from her union with Harold.

And what of Harold? What did those stars think of him? His conduct that day had been absolutely correct. At the church, and at the reception which followed the ceremony, his demeanour had expressed genuine confidence in his own happiness. Joan had watched with critical eyes the manner in which he looked at and addressed Millicent, and she found no cause for complaint. But could she be sure of the permanence of his love? The doubts which for several months had persistently attacked her faith in Harold gathered themselves together for one last desperate struggle. Did he realize what a delicate, sensitive soul he had this day promised to protect? Joan tried to summon her old love for Harold to soothe her present anxieties. Memories of that love were not without their sadness, but even their sadness held a suggestion of peace.

Joan held tightly the bars of her window, and her eyes flashed into the darkness. It was as if, facing the darkness of the night, she defied any evil influence to come near her darling. So she stood, and gradually the stars began to twinkle soothing caresses towards her. This sky belonged to all the lonely bits of humanity which were scattered over God's earth. Each

soul lived alone and knew its own secret, but the heavens belonged to all alike. This thought brought comfort to the anxious young heart. Suddenly, to her tired brain, the darkness seemed to be animated, and to be approaching nearer to where she stood; its approach gave her no sense of fear. In the mysterious hush of her surroundings Joan heard a whisper of love and hope, and she sank on to the floor next to the window, able to indulge in the blessed relief of tears.

‘You’re a silly, Joan Carey!’ she began, apostrophizing herself as was her wont. ‘It’s no use pretending you’re only crying on Millicent’s account; you’re dreadfully sorry for yourself, too, and so you had better say so. You expected Richard Ellis to be at the church. You wanted to see his face in order to tell if he believed in you again or not. What does his opinion matter to you, I should like to know? You can get on all right, and he can think what he chooses. You don’t want anything in the world but your painting. Think what Estelle said in her letter last night; how envious she is of you now——’ Joan stopped in the midst of her strange soliloquy and laughed outright, a laugh which sounded unreal even to her own ears, and

rather frightened her. 'What are you thinking of, Joan Carey? Are you thinking of the silly, untrue things people said to you to-day, when they congratulated you on your chance of going to London and working? They think all you want is work, work, work! Silly old things! Some of them are married, too, and have babies, but yet they don't understand. You, Joan, are to make work your happiness and the justification of your life. Can you do it, Joan Carey?'

Joan wiped her eyes quite tenderly; she *was* sorry for herself. A leaf in her book of life had turned over heavily that day; she had her work to look forward to, but for the moment she hated the idea of work. She wanted one thing, and one thing alone, and that was sympathy. A little woman's bright black eyes flashed for a moment across her vision. Yes; Estelle understood in spite of her chattering letters, and she would help. *She* was waiting for her brother Ernest. Joan got up from the floor with a sudden impetuous jump, and threw off her clothes in a sadly careless fashion. Then she flung herself on her bed, and, with all the energy of her will, commanded her whirling brain to be still and give her rest; and it obeyed after she had endured some hours of weary tossing.

CHAPTER XII

IN May of the following year Joan found herself one evening at a concert, seated next to Millicent. A very fine violin solo was being played, but Joan heard little of the melody. She was watching Millicent's hands as they twitched nervously on her lap, and thinking anxious thoughts about her friend.

The solo ended amid great applause ; Millicent spoke a few words to her father, who was seated on her other side. Eric Frankland had certainly improved during the past year ; his face, although still pitifully weak, was more human, and when he spoke his voice sounded less timid than it had done a few months before. A girl sang a simple joyous song, a song of spring. Joan, still anxiously watching, saw Millicent's blue eyes fill with tears, although she appeared to be looking straight in front of her.

‘That’s good,’ said Eric Frankland, with a sigh of calm enjoyment.

But pure joyousness was outside his life and could not touch the depths of his soul. It could only satisfy his senses.

‘I say, Joan, do you see who that is?’ exclaimed Millicent suddenly; and she pulled her friend’s arm in her excitement. ‘Look! he is bringing in the girl who is to play the Chopin.’

‘I see,’ said Joan, staring hard at her programme.

‘Yes, of course,’ said Millicent; ‘I remember the name was on the programme. Don’t you see it? It is Madeline Ellis. I expect it is his sister. People said she played beautifully. How queer, though! How small the world is! To think that he should have turned up again after all this time, and at a concert, too. See! he is looking at you, and I believe that he recognises you. Now he has turned. Oh, she has begun! See how he stands by the piano while she plays; her eyes are fixed on his face, and he is smiling quite tenderly. I never thought he could look so nice.’

‘Hush! hush!’ whispered an old gentleman reproachfully from the row behind Millicent.

‘She does play well,’ added Millicent before she subsided into silence.

Joan watched Richard Ellis as he bent towards his wife, and she played her whole soul out to him. The audience was delighted with her performance, and called for an encore, which, however, was refused. As Madeline Ellis bowed to her public, her movement seemed mechanical. She held her husband’s hand, and there was a far-away look in her eyes. Joan felt unreasonably annoyed.

‘She isn’t a separate being at all,’ she thought. ‘I suppose that he exacts this music in return for his devotion.’

The interval in the programme arrived, and Joan saw Richard Ellis coming towards her. He took the seat next to her, which happened to be vacant, and bowed to Millicent.

‘I hope you don’t mind my having come to you, Miss Carey,’ he said. ‘I had no intention of doing so when she first began to play, but before she had finished I felt that I must come and tell you that I am sorry for my unkind behaviour towards you; what you did, I know now, was done for my sake.’

He spoke very softly.

‘I have left off worrying about you,’ she

replied, vainly endeavouring to suppress the excitement in her voice.

‘But you do think of me sometimes all the same?’

‘What then? I can only think of you as cruel and unjust, and—and——’

‘Yes; and what, Miss Joan?’

‘And dreadfully egotistic!’

He smiled, and she thought that she hated him for that smile. In reality she only hated herself for speaking at his dictation.

‘She played well, didn’t she?’ he asked.

‘Yes, beautifully. Were you not pleased?’

Joan asked this question with the old enthusiasm which had first charmed Richard Ellis.

Instead of replying, however, he jerked his head in Millicent’s direction, and asked:

‘Is she happy?’

‘Yes, yes, of course. Why do you ask?’ asked Joan, badly concealing her distress.

‘No, I was afraid not,’ said Ellis, as if replying to Joan’s thoughts instead of to her words.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Joan, becoming suddenly pale, even to her lips.

‘I was afraid that a fixed idea in the brain of

a shallow fellow like Harold French must thrust away love and all other better things than itself. He must worry her always with the one idea which he once allowed to take up so much of his brain. I don't suppose he means to be anything but kind—but there, he is a fool! That sort of man can't work his way through a fallacy; if he is to get rid of it at all, he jerks it on to somebody else weaker than himself. But I must go now, as the second part is beginning, and Madeline plays soon. May I come to see you? I want to hear about the painting. When may I come?'

'You had better not come at all. I had much rather,' said Joan, with terrible earnestness.

Ellis looked at her, but her face did not relax. He bowed again to Millicent and withdrew.

'What is he like now?' whispered Millicent eagerly. 'I thought I ought not to listen, but tell me what he said. He looks *much* nicer than he used to. Is he dreadfully proud of his sister?'

Joan pressed Millicent's hand.

'Hush, dear! the singing has begun. We must talk afterwards.'

Joan sat back in her chair, telling herself that she had been quite right to refuse to see Richard

Ellis. His conceit and audacity were intolerable. Also she was afraid to place herself under the influence of his will. If only he had not had that strange power of interpretation! Whenever he approached her holy of holies, it seemed to become unveiled, and she could find no refuge from his rude curiosity. Perhaps it was because he himself was entirely without pretence that he evoked the real in others. She was afraid of him; yet he fascinated her, and there was room in her heart for remorse that she had sent him away with such uncompromising severity. After all, he had expressed regret for his former unkindness, and had not alluded to the provocation which she had given him. He had spoken very kindly. Joan looked up and saw Ellis again leading his wife to the piano.

‘She does look frail, poor girl!’ thought Joan. ‘I suppose that her strength is sapped by all that she has gone through, or perhaps it is by his will. Where he is there can be hardly room for a strong vitality outside himself. She is going to play. She looks rather nervous, but he is smiling at her, and his face speaks encouragement. Of course she will do well now; anybody could. How delighted he

looks! I should not have thought he *could* respond to a bright melody like that. His eyes are dancing an accompaniment to her music. He looks quite gay, as if he would begin to dance in another minute. Richard Ellis dance!

The pianist's fingers flew over the keys. The melody grew in excitement until it reached a point of ecstatic joy. Then it sank into a gentle minor key, and died off in a few soft, tender notes. The musician had felt, and been able to express, the fulness of human joy. Afterwards she revealed the pain of infinite yearning which is rooted in its depths.

'His face is like a wax image. It shows the impression of every note. Can he be pretending, I wonder?' thought Joan; but she did not wonder at all.

Madeline Ellis bowed her thanks to the audience. Her husband whispered a word to her. She resumed her seat at the piano. This time she played an invocation to the goddess of pity. It was an appeal without hope and without fear. Its parts hung together quite loosely; there was, moreover, little strength now in Madeline's execution. Every now and then a wail of exquisite tenderness broke

through the melody. As Joan listened, she heard the story of poor Madeline's life—the story without a purpose, purified by its extreme inward pathos, and strengthened by tenderness and pity from without.

Madeline looked very tired when her husband led her from the platform amid the encouraging applause of the audience. Joan felt disinclined to listen to more of the concert, and was glad when Millicent could be persuaded to leave.

'I am in no hurry, really, Joan,' she said, rising with some reluctance. 'I dread the night, for I sleep so badly.'

'You'll sleep well to-night, dearest,' answered Joan. 'Harold left strict orders, and I am to see them carried out.'

'Harold has been wonderfully kind and thoughtful,' said Millicent; but she sighed as she spoke.

That night Joan sat for a whole hour by the bedside of her friend, and tried to soothe the tired mind to rest. Harold had been summoned to see his mother who was ill, and so Joan had taken his place in trying to look after his wife.

'Joan, darling, get me the calendar which is in the top drawer of my writing-table,' said

Millicent soon after she had got to bed. 'Thank you; now I can scratch off May 2. This is the fiftieth day. Do you think it can last? It's a long time to resist, isn't it? Fifty days!'

She laughed somewhat hysterically, and, with a weary movement, pushed the hair off her heated forehead. Then she half raised herself, and asked in an excited tone:

'Why—why do you look at me like this? What is the matter with me?'

'Hush, dear! hush!' said Joan, laying her gently back on to the pillows as if she had been a baby. 'I think he *will* resist as long as you remain strong; but if you worry and get ill, what will he do? For *his* sake, Millicent, try to rest.'

'I *can't* rest,' said Millicent; 'I'm too tired.'

'But, Harold——'

'Yes, I know—I know I am utterly wicked, but I cannot help it. I can't force my brain to rest when it has so much to do. Oh, Joan, do you know that the last time poor father—you know—well, I was sitting next to his bed when he got better, and as soon as he recognised me I told him how grieved I was for his suffering, for I loved him so much, but that I knew he

would get better just for the sake of my love. Then, poor dear! he turned his face to the wall, and said between his sobs: "You speak out of pity. Why don't you turn me out? That's what I deserve. I am spoiling your life." I said: "Father, how *can* you say that? Won't you believe that I love you? *Why* don't you trust me?" and he looked at me with such a wonderful, deep look, and asked: "Did you mean that, Millicent?" I did not have to answer, for he looked at me and believed.'

She told this story in a far-away voice, as if unconscious of Joan's presence, and Joan listened as if the story were new to her. Suddenly, however, Millicent remembered where she was, and cried out:

'But I have told you all this before! Why did you let me tell it you again? You let me be as silly as I like.'

'Go on, dear; talk as much as you wish. I think it rests you to speak; only lie down.'

Millicent tossed her head impatiently.

'You are beginning to treat me as Harold does, as if I were half out of my mind. I don't want to be soothed like a naughty child. What have I done to you all?'

'Why, dearest, you have done nothing, and

we think you most particularly sane ; but we want you to rest a little, and to save you from thinking too much, until—until your trouble is over.'

'Then you *can't*!' said Millicent passionately. 'Persuasions are not of the slightest good. You know quite well that on the very day when father began to believe in my love Harold made the doctor try to persuade me to live away from father until after—after the child was born ; but I *couldn't* do it even for his sake, and not even for the child's sake. I *couldn't*! Call me anything you like. Say I am the most wicked woman in the world.'

'I *couldn't*, Millicent.'

'Then think me wicked. That's worse.'

She laughed a strange, bitter laugh, which tightened Joan's heart-strings until they ached terribly. How she longed for the old Millicent, for the merry girl who had lived from day to day as the birds live, nourished by the joy of God's beautiful world! What could she do to raise the shadow which had fallen across her friend's bright life?

'I wish you understood what I really think of you, Millicent,' she whispered.

'I know—I know you are much too kind,

really,' she answered more quietly. 'Don't think me ungrateful. It's not that I don't recognise all that you and Harold are doing for me, but—but, Joan, may I tell you something, and will you give me a promise in return?'

'If you will go to sleep as soon as it is given.'

'Yes, I will. I think your promise may make sleep possible, but if you refuse——'

'Go on, Millicent.'

'Well, I am sure I shan't live to be a mother. No; don't stop me, nor try to comfort me. It's no use; you cannot persuade me that I shall live, and if you could, you would not comfort me that way. I don't want to live. I am afraid of my child, and this fear is killing me. I want to die, and to save my child from living.'

'But, Millicent, what right have you to speak like this, or to feel this? You know that Harold——'

'Yes, we are coming to him. It's not Harold's fault; never, never has he spoken about the future except with hope and joy. He has been perfect to me, gentle, loving and considerate. Yet when I see him in the presence of my father I can read fear in his heart.'

‘This is fancy, pure fancy. Harold has no fear now, whatever he may have felt once upon a time. Why, with you as mother——’

‘No, no, Joan ; I tell you that this feeling of dread will never die till I die. If it has gone from Harold, it has passed into my soul. I could not even love my child. I could not love Harold, for he would be my child’s father. No ; I want nothing now but to die !’

‘Millicent, you must not talk like this. Mother says that fears often come to people when they are weak like you, but they mean nothing at all, and you must not notice them.’

‘Poor Aunt Margaret ! how should she understand ? But she is *so* good to me, so loving, and so tender. Ever since we came to London she has been more than a mother to me. I sometimes feel as if I could laugh about that time when she seemed so cold to me ; it was a sort of nightmare, I think.’

‘Yes, and it has passed away, as all nightmares will. Now she feels nothing for you but love. Everybody loves you, Millicent.’

‘You old dear,’ said Millicent affectionately ; and the voice contained some of the ring which had belonged to it in the past. ‘Now for the promise,’ she added gravely, after a

short pause. 'When I die, Joan, Harold must not blame himself for anything. He must believe that I died happy, loving him truly, and ever so thankful that my awful dread had been put to sleep in the only possible way. I shall die believing that all will come right some day, because we meant nothing but good when we married.'

Joan recalled in a flash her own struggles that day long ago, when she had run to Nana for strength and help. How long ago that day seemed!

'You have come to believe that, Millicent?'

'Yes; haven't you?' whispered Millicent, in some anxiety.

'Of course, dearest, I can't help it since I believe in the God of love and pity.'

'Yes; and we must believe in Him, must we not, Joan, if we want to live? God often seems so cruel, but He is not *really*, is He, dear?'

Her voice was full of pathetic appeal.

'No; the reality is love and pity, and if we don't see that, it is because we are poor things, and our eyes are sometimes weak. As soon as we see again, we are at peace.'

'Yes; I feel as if I shall sleep to-night, if you promise——' said Millicent wearily.

‘Yes, dear, I promise to do my best to comfort Harold if I am alive and he is alive when you die. Is that all? You are so tired; won’t you rest?’ Joan spoke with a forced brightness; she was determined not to notice the painful lump in her throat. She stroked Millicent’s golden hair fondly. ‘Do go to sleep now,’ she whispered.

‘No; we’ve only had half the promise, Joan. There is my father.’

‘Won’t he keep till the morning? Your voice sounds quite weak.’

‘No; we must finish it all to-night, Joan—this very night, and then I will sleep.’ Her voice was intensely weary. ‘You must promise to make father believe that my love cannot leave him, that it belongs to him even when I am gone. It is the most real part of me, and will go on always and always, never changing. You understand, dear? and you *will* tell him? You understand?’

Joan did not answer, but in a few moments she sighed a deep sigh of relief, for Millicent slept. She sat by the bedside, watching in deep anxiety, afraid to breathe, lest she should wake the sleeping girl. Millicent’s white hand clutched the sheet, as if the

emotion of the last few moments were not yet at rest. The breathing came so quickly, too. There was no sign of peace about the girl, even though she lay unconscious of her surroundings. Suddenly, however, Joan saw a change come over the prostrate figure. A pretty flush spread over the beautiful face on the pillow. A smile played about the lips, which opened slightly; the hand unclutched the sheet, and the limbs relaxed. Millicent was dreaming, and in her dreams the happiness of the past returned. Joan gazed at her sleeping friend, and her eyes were full of worship. She sat back in her chair and prayed fervently that Millicent might be saved, and live to be happy again.

‘I don’t know how it can be managed,’ she murmured feebly; ‘but oh, God, save her! do it *somehow!*’

* * * * *

After a restless night Joan crept out of her friend’s room soon after six o’clock, and, having dressed herself, walked out into the morning loveliness. The air was fresh and alive with birds. She walked swiftly out into Kensington Gardens and across the grass to the Serpentine. She stood watching a myriad of living forms

playing about on the top of the water. 'I wonder,' she thought, 'if the grandeur of being a human compensates one for the trouble of wanting so much and caring so much about things. Those flies *are* having a jolly time.' She sat down on a seat, curling her legs up in a most ungraceful attitude, which, however, did not seem to disturb the happiness of the flies. 'It's lovely to paint and to dream, and to do all that sort of thing. But oh, how everything *hurts*! Is the joy worth the pain, I wonder?' She picked a piece of grass and held it out in front of her as if expecting it to answer her queries. Then, without any apparent connection of thought, she said aloud to herself:

'I think Richard Ellis would be pleased with my last piece of work. It is almost a pity that he will never see it. Of course, it doesn't matter, though. *Nothing* matters. Estelle says that, and she is generally right.'

Joan heard someone approaching her from behind, but she ignored the new-comer, as she had ignored the few other individuals who had inconsiderately come to share with her the pleasures of the gardens in their morning glory. Suddenly she heard herself addressed.

‘Are you not cold here?’ asked Eric Frankland, taking a seat next to her.

Joan started, and uncoiled herself. She felt terribly annoyed at this unwelcome interruption to her meditations.

‘I watched you come out this morning, and I followed you,’ he said timidly; ‘I want to ask you something. Her light was on so late last night; you were in her room. Do you think she is ill—*very* ill, I mean?’

‘Yes, I do,’ said Joan rather brutally. Then she bowed her head in shame.

Eric Frankland winced.

‘Can’t I do anything?’ he asked, with a sob which increased Joan’s sense of contrition.

She looked up and stared at this broken being at her side. Generally she felt no pity for him—only anger. She could easily have forgiven him if he had merely wrecked his own life, remaining on the other side of the globe until he died. But she hated him for having returned to trouble them all, and to kill her darling Millicent, who was more precious to her than her own life. To-day, however, as she looked at the expression of misery on his face, she longed for the power to say some kind word. But kindness seemed to be frozen on

her lips by the force of contempt. At last, half in remonstrance, and half in self-pity, she asked :

‘Why did you come back?’

He trembled.

‘Shall I go away again? I can go at once. Shall I leave her? Would she wish me to go? Am I killing her by being here?’

The questions were asked in anguish.

Joan did not answer. He turned upon her, and something of his lost manhood seemed to return to him, as he said authoritatively :

‘Tell me what you think. I wish to know.’

Joan was still silent.

‘You won’t answer?’ he said, bending over her. ‘Then I understand.’

Joan was frightened. She suddenly remembered that Millicent wanted this man to believe in her love. For her sake Joan must not let him go away. If he left at her suggestion, Joan would be bartering Millicent’s life-work for a few years of peace. No; she must make Eric believe that his departure would add to his daughter’s suffering. She sought desperately for a convincing argument, and when it came, it frightened her, the creator.

‘You can save her if you will,’ she said;

'you can make her want to be a mother for your sake. Show her that the something which was meant to be Eric Frankland, and which was destroyed by sin, has yet a right to live—that it *must* live—and that she must give it birth.'

Joan's voice grew in assurance as she realized how her words, spoken on impulse, were affecting the man by her side. She pleaded with great earnestness, for she was pleading for Millicent.

'She thinks this child should die; she is afraid for it to live. Make her take courage for your sake. Make her see how by living she makes you live; how this child may justify your life and save you from despair. She loves you so much; she will live for your sake.'

His lips shook, but he could not speak.

'She *is* ill, Mr. Frankland; her nerves have given way, and her condition frightens us. You can save her by giving her hope. See what a grand mission is waiting for you, and you thought your opportunities had gone for ever. You can save her; you can give her hope—you, her father, whom she loves. But you must begin at once, for she is *very* ill, and the time is coming near.'

He raised his hand as if to stop more words. Then he rose, lifted his hat, and, murmuring some words which Joan could not understand, he walked away.

Joan sat for some time staring at the flies, which were still dancing on the water.

CHAPTER XIII

ONE Saturday afternoon a few weeks later Joan stood by her easel in her studio. In the corner of the room sat Estelle Melline, sipping tea. The little woman generally came in to see Joan on her way home from work on Saturday afternoons. Joan was giving a few touches to the drapery of a woman, who sat sewing as if her life were in the work which she held in her hands. Her's was a tired face, but there was a look of fortitude in her eyes. Her work might be dull, but the worker was inspired. The picture was called 'For Love's Sake.' Joan paused in her work, and stood at a little distance, looking at it.

'I can't help it, Estelle ; this picture may be altogether bad, but it's true, and I don't care who says it isn't. That poor creature there is having a bad time. She is half-starved and poorly clad, but she is happy, and so am I. I believe some of my soul is in her.'

In a moment Estelle stood by Joan's side and squeezed her arm sympathetically.

'Yes, you *have* put a piece of joy into that sewing-woman there,' she said meditatively, 'and it's taken from the most precious corner which we poor humans treasure in our little cupboards. It's not only *you*, my dear; you may be in that picture, but so am I, and so is half the world. That's why it may bring you success. The public will read, and for once they won't be too stupid to understand.'

'You think there is really some chance for this, then? You think it may succeed?'

'I think there is some chance for *you*, my dear, if you go on and work hard.'

'What a task-master you are!'

'Yes, yes; it wouldn't be fair if you didn't work. *I* want to, but I have to do fronts for dresses instead. You must work for us both, and you will please me. Peep again into the same cupboard, Joan, before you begin your next picture, and you will draw out something real once again; and next time—— Ah, what a child it is!'

Joan's cheeks were positively glowing with delight, because of the suggestions which her friend was making to her.

'You *do* want success, little Joan, don't you? The longing almost makes you ache.'

'Yes, I want it *dreadfully*; and you have made me so happy, Estelle, because you said the public would understand this woman of mine. That means success, doesn't it?'

'I am not sure; the most important thing of all is for you yourself to create and to rejoice in creation. If you can feel that your picture lives, if you can get a glow from that, then success——' Estelle gave a contemptuous snap with her fingers. 'The world is stupid, my dear,' she said.

There was a tap at the door, and Mr. Carey's voice was heard to ask:

'May I come in, Joan? It's criminal, I know, to disturb you now, but you must forgive me for once.'

'All right; come in.'

Joan opened the door, and dragged him in to sit on the couch which her models used. She curled herself up on the ground at his feet. He put his hand caressingly on her hair.

'I am home early, and I want to talk. You were not working, were you?'

'No; at that moment I was talking to Estelle.'

Mr. Carey looked round ; Estelle was arranging her hat in front of a small mirror in the furthest corner of the room.

‘It’s all right, Mr. Carey,’ she said ; ‘I did not expect you to see me. I am going home.’

‘Don’t hurry away,’ said Mr. Carey, trying to rise, but Joan held him down.

‘It’s duty!’ cried the little woman, pointing to the door with one hand and pressing her lips with the other. ‘I am due home. Good-bye, Joan.’

The little woman disappeared.

‘She always gets home early on Saturdays ; she thinks her lost brother Ernest will come back on a Saturday. This particular fancy has only come to her recently. She will buy flowers on her way home, and make her room festive in case he comes.’

‘Poor little woman!’ said Mr. Carey. ‘I wonder if there is much in her besides dreams and emotions.’

‘Of course there isn’t, father. What else is wanted ? You and I have more *body*, certainly, but the dreams and emotions are the important things in life, and Estelle has her full share of them.’

‘My poor little girl!’ said Mr. Carey tenderly.

‘Why poor, father? Just before you came in, I was thinking how happy I am—like that woman over there.’

She jerked her head towards the picture, and her father looked in the same direction.

‘Well, my dear, I can’t see very well, and you probably know best, as she is your creation; but of all the miserable beings——’

Joan pressed her hand on to her father’s lips.

‘Go and look at her,’ she commanded. ‘It’s called “For Love’s Sake.”’

He went up and examined the picture thoroughly.

‘Yes, dear, I believe I have some idea now as to what you mean.’

‘I couldn’t have painted a subject like that once upon a time, before I had got happy like she is. Come and sit down again. You do understand me, don’t you? So few people can, but you do.’

She raised her face to his, and it glowed with animation. These two had grown very close to one another during the past year. He had always been a devoted father to her, and she had loved him with a daughter’s full measure of love, but lately the bonds of friendship and

mutual dependence had come to strengthen that of natural affinity.

'You think me mad to talk of happiness when we both know the agony of Millicent's illness. You understand, of course, what her sufferings mean to me. But to-day I am talking of that part of self which suffers, or rejoices, quite independently of that which happens outside. We can't ever free ourselves from this particular part of self, and its condition affects our whole life *always* and at every moment. Unless it is happy, the most lovely outside things can't make us rejoice; and if it *is* happy, despair is impossible even to those whom the world calls hopeless. Have you the slightest idea of my meaning, dear?'

'I'm getting on,' he said kindly. 'Your old father is very dense, so give him some illustration of your philosophy if you can. Are you in love, Joan?'

'That's just what I am not,' said Joan.

'Have you ever been, dear?'

Joan's face became very pink.

'Sometimes I fancied—— When we were in Hampshire, you know, father, Millicent and I used to dream of husbands, and it was one

of our favourite pretending games to plan what we should do with them and with our children.'

'Was there any consistency about the pretended husband? Did he ever take any definite shape?'

'I believe he did occasionally,' said Joan, laughing. 'Probably, because Harold was the only boy whom we both knew intimately, each of us thought of him as her own peculiar possession. But this fact made no difference to our games. We were such different children that we told our hero's story quite differently. He always seemed like two people, and so did quite well for our games. Of course, when Millicent got well, I saw that Harold belonged to her. I always loved her so much that it soon became easy enough for me to cover up the pain which his comparative neglect caused me. Besides, we were too old then for pretending games.'

'And you never got another hero, Joan? Mother and I were dreadfully anxious at one time, lest Richard Ellis, who was quite unsuitable, should persuade you that he cared for you.'

Joan laughed rather bitterly.

'If you had known things and understood me, you would not have worried.'

‘Parents are proverbially ignorant and dull of comprehension, Joan.’

‘Of course, Richard Ellis interested me immensely,’ continued Joan, ignoring her father’s remark. ‘He was so strong and real, and had such high aims. Yes, he had, father; so it is no use your shaking your head.’

‘I agree that his attentions were flattering, my dear. It is always nice to be liked, and to see people affected by one’s opinions.’

‘And I had nobody else,’ said Joan, a little sadly. ‘He seemed to satisfy a real want.’

‘But he was never your hero, Joan?’

‘Never! never! in the way you mean,’ she said, with great earnestness. ‘He couldn’t be.’

‘You missed him when he went away? Why did he not come back?’

‘He was angry with me, and did not want my friendship. He left me; I cared dreadfully at first, and had some bad times.’

‘But now?’

‘Now I feel that I would not have his friendship, even if he was ready to give it to me. Things are better as they are. The horrid restlessness in which he left me soon vanished—it came, I suppose, from wounded pride—and I began to care a great deal about my

work. Even now I am glad to remember that Richard Ellis did once respect me a great deal, but I don't think I want ever again to be a special person to anybody.'

'And the absence of this want has made you happy, Joan?'

'Yes, father, ever so happy, for I have discovered that if we haven't got the special love of an individual, we can always feel the general love which is about us everywhere and in everybody, and it is the best thing in the world to love and to be loved.'

Joan did not notice that her father was looking at her with an anxious expression in his eyes. She was too excited to consider whether he understood her or not. She sprang up and stood near her picture.

'Can't you see that this poor woman has had a terrible time, but she has struggled through? And now she is stitching away at that dull shirt, and is quite happy, because she has learned life's secret and is working for love's sake. Of course, it is heavenly to be given love straight off, and not to have to *find* it for one's self. But if it is not given to us, we *can* find it. That's what she and I have learned. It only needs a struggle, and then comes peace; and she has

found this peace and so have I, and we are both happy. Oh, what a silly I am !

Her own earnestness had brought tears to her eyes, and, with sudden shame, she realized that she had completely yielded to a fit of self-absorption.

‘ Dear little girlie,’ said George Carey, gently putting his arm round Joan, and drawing her away from the window against which she was trying to hide her face from him. ‘ The day will come when you will think over these wonderful discoveries of yours—these peeps into reality, and you will smile at them, Joan.’

‘ And will things seem quite clear then?’ said Joan, with a strange yearning in her voice, for, in spite of all her dogmatizing, she could not rest her mind on many certainties.

‘ You will hardly feel more sure about things, dear, but you will care less.’

‘ I can’t believe that—and I don’t want to!’ cried Joan impetuously.

George Carey’s eyes twinkled.

‘ Don’t believe what?’ he asked.

‘ That you dry up and care less. I believe you care more.’

‘ About the things that matter, perhaps, but one cares less about one’s own experiences, and

generalizes less from them. A man of sixty knows that his moods *are* moods, and can claim no permanence. There ends their glory. That's what "growing old" means. But we have things to make up for what we have lost for——'

'There you both are!' said Mrs. Carey, coming into the room, apparently in a great hurry. 'I want you, George.'

She paused a moment as she passed the picture on the easel.

'You *have* got on with that, Joan, and I expect that it is wonderfully clever. But I can't think why you don't occasionally paint a pleasant picture. I know I am ignorant on these matters, but I feel it to be a pity that if you don't paint a nude figure, representing goodness knows what, you must choose a woman in rags, wretched enough to make one cry. There, I don't mean to be unkind, but you work so hard that it seems *such* a pity. That's all. But you are wonderful to make *anything* look like *anything* when all's said and done.'

'Thanks, Mummy dear!' said Joan, laughing. 'Sit down a moment. I don't get both of you up here together often, and you must let me make you comfortable. Have a chocolate?'

She pressed her mother to be seated next to Mr. Carey on the lounge, and handed them both sweets.

‘I’ve been to Millicent, and I want you to go now, George,’ said Mrs. Carey.

‘Is there any change?’

‘No; but I had an awful time. Her father came to me, and said he wished to speak to Millicent, and I told him that she could not be disturbed. That’s what Harold wanted me to say; but Eric got very excited, and said that he alone could save Millicent’s life, and that if I resisted him I should have to take the consequences. He raved like a lunatic. Then the nurse came down and assured us that Millicent was asleep for the first time for thirty-six hours. Eric Frankland put his head in his hands and wept like a baby. I tried to comfort him, but he would not speak to me. Just as I was leaving, he said that I need not be afraid, for he did not mean to kill his child, and he went on with other talk of the same sort. Now, George, you must go and see what is on his mind. He says that he has something to tell her which will save her. Go and find out what it is. I can’t be responsible.’

‘All right, my dear, I’ll go. I am afraid poor

Eric's love has become a danger to himself and to Millicent.'

George Carey found, on reaching the house, that his old friend had already been admitted to his daughter's bedside. He was obliged to sit with Harold in the study, awaiting with dread the result of the interview.

'I told him that he was not to see her,' Harold said angrily. 'He made a terrible fuss, and Millicent heard and began to worry. But I intend to be master in my own house. I won't have him in the place. His presence is the cause of all this panic. If Millicent had been left to herself she would have got on like any other girl. Of course, this man is a constant reminder of the horror which we meant to wipe out on our wedding-day. It is a cruel shame that he should spoil our lives.'

George Carey did not answer for a few moments; then he said:

'Millicent is sure that *you* have no fear, isn't she?'

Harold laughed rather bitterly.

'I have done my best to assure her,' he said curtly; and George Carey did not attempt to break the silence which followed.

Eric Frankland sat by Millicent's bedside,

holding her delicate hand in his, gazing at her with eyes which were full of yearning brightness. He was pleading with her, imploring her to live and give life for his sake. There was a strong ring in his voice, which Millicent had never heard before. He was saying :

‘Millicent, you must be all right. You will be all right, dear.’

‘Oh, don’t, father—don’t go on like this ! All I want is just for it to be over, and for me to be at rest, knowing that my baby is dead.’

‘Hush, child, for I want you to live ! I want the baby, too, to live.’

‘You, father ?’ and her voice was terribly weary.

She was too tired to wonder at his extraordinary self-assertion. She only wanted to be left alone.

‘Yes, dear ; you have made me sorry for the past. Now you can make me hope for the future. The doctor says that you will be all right if you take courage and hope for the best for yourself and for your child. Do this for my sake, Millicent—for *mine* !’

She raised her tired eyes to his, and the intensity of his longing touched her deeply. A wave of pity passed quickly over her, and

it was pity deepened by remorse. Was she a coward to want to die?

'This child is my last, my only hope, Millicent,' he said. 'Think what the new life means to me. There was some good in me once. That good will live again, created anew by your purity and goodness. Take courage, my child, and do this for me.'

'But I am frightened,' she whispered.

He shrank from her as if she had struck him.

'Oh, father, it is not my fault! Don't turn from me! If I could save the child, if I could be *sure* about saving it from the thing that may be in its nature——'

He rose and his head was bent. He turned towards the door so that she should not see his face. He believed he had failed once again.

'Father!' cried Millicent, half raising herself on her arm. 'I did not mean that—I was cruel, and I hurt you. No! no! no! Come back!'

He turned again, but his face was quite aged. Hope had gone. Millicent's heart ached for him.

'No! no!' she cried again in intense excitement. 'I will live! I will live, and the child shall live! God shall help us both. He *can*, and He *shall*!'

She sank back on her bed. The old nurse came in, and looked threateningly at Eric Frankland as she turned to the bedside.

'You've tired her out, sir,' she began in a scolding voice. 'I hope you are satisfied.'

She forced a stimulant to Millicent's lips.

'Nana, don't!' whispered the girl; 'lean down! I'll whisper. He has saved me. I shall do well now. Tell him so.'

The old woman approached Eric, but her militant expression showed that no soft words were intended. But she saw that he was even more exhausted than her patient, and her motherly heart softened because he was suffering. The emotion which accompanied his unusual self-assertion had completely worn him out. She saw that he was about to break down, and she hurried him towards the door, saying kindly:

'She must rest a little now. Then you shall see her again. You have done her a lot of good.'

He allowed himself to be accompanied to the door. Then, to the intense annoyance of the old woman, he turned, and, brushing past her, went once more to the bed and bent over the golden head. Millicent raised both hands and drew him to her.

‘God bless you, dear, and thank you for your love!’

He lifted a piece of her hair to his lips and reverently kissed it.

Then he walked out of the room. At the foot of the stairs Harold met him, and said :

‘Will you come into my study for a moment, Mr. Frankland, please? I want to speak to you. Take a seat,’ he added, as Eric obeyed.

‘No, thank you ; I am going out.’

‘Well, I only wanted to say that I don’t think you quite realize what harm you are doing to Millicent. I can’t allow you to excite her so often. So I must ask you not to go to her room again till this is over. I don’t want to be disagreeable, but I ask this for her sake.’

Harold looked up. Eric Frankland was laughing at him ! Harold saw a distinct smile on the face of the man in front of him, whom he despised. He tugged nervously at the handle of the desk against which he sat, trying thus to save his temper.

‘This is no laughing matter to me, Mr. Frankland.’

‘Of course you don’t know what I have done for Millicent,’ said Eric, in soft, pitying tones which riled Harold.

‘Don’t I, though? I know you have blackened her life and mine; that she, who is better than any living woman, is filled with terrors which belong properly to men like you. If it hadn’t been for you we should have been two of the happiest people in the world. You have caused her ruin. She suffers instead of *you*.’

Eric held up his hands as if to ward off the blows inflicted by the young man’s angry words. Then he walked unsteadily to the door.

‘I can’t answer,’ he muttered. ‘He’s right. She suffers for me.’

Harold stood still till he heard the street-door close. Then he hurried out, intending to make amends by some kindly words. But, instead, he stood watching Eric Frankland pass down the street out of sight.

‘What is the use of calling him back?’ he thought. ‘I should say the same thing to him to-morrow.’

* * * * *

That night Eric Frankland was brought home dead. He had drunk himself to death.

That night Millicent’s child was born.

CHAPTER XIV

ONE morning, two years later, Joan was walking through the first room of the Royal Academy a few minutes after the doors were open. As she passed the place where her own picture hung, she caught herself glancing furtively at it, and then hurried on.

Richard Ellis rose from one of the couches and came up to her. They had not met since the night of the concert. She was overwhelmed with shyness, for she feared that he had seen her looking at her picture.

‘May I congratulate you, Miss Carey? It is a wonderful picture, and shows considerable advance over your “Needlewoman.”’

‘Did you see that too?’

‘Yes, of course I did. Will you not allow me to be especially interested in your work? Have you a few minutes to spare? There is hardly anybody in the Black-and-White Room. Will you come there for a chat?’

She saw no way of escape, and therefore accompanied him, but with no very good grace.

‘How are your people?’ he asked, as they sat down. ‘Are Mr. and Mrs. Carey well?’

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘And—Mrs. French?’

‘Millicent is quite well. The baby——’

‘Gave you your idea for the picture.’

‘Yes,’ she said curtly.

She resented his habit of anticipating the expression of her thoughts.

‘The woman pausing in her washing to look up at her baby in his high bassinet; the baby holding out its hands and crowing with pure joy; the tired woman’s eyes glowing with hope. It’s *very* good and very true.’

He spoke meditatively, without appearing to address her. She longed to get away, for she feared him.

‘I expect Millicent here soon,’ she said.

‘How soon? We have not met for so long.’

‘I don’t see the good of meeting. We don’t get on particularly well, do we?’

‘Well, I think we might in time. I often think of you, and would like to talk to you. With most people one only wants to exchange words.’

‘Ought I to feel flattered, I wonder?’ she asked laughingly, ‘or ought I to try to say something nice in return, so as to remove my feeling of obligation? I can’t pretend that I feel it easy to speak to you, because——’

‘Because why?’

‘Because after two minutes in your company I feel a senseless longing to run away. I dare say it is quite my fault, but you frighten me. You see, you are not afraid of anything or of anybody; so you can’t understand people who are conscious of forces outside themselves which they recognise and reverence, fear and love. *You* obey your own will and nothing else in the world.’

She stopped suddenly, and her eyes met his.

‘I beg your pardon,’ she murmured; ‘I let my tongue run on. I have been very rude.’

He was watching her with a rather troubled expression on his face.

‘I wanted you to say what you thought—to speak out,’ he said.

‘I know you did,’ she retorted angrily. ‘That’s what makes it so horrible to be with you. What right have you to force people to do what you choose? Why should we all encourage you, as your wife does, to make you

feel omnipotent? Some of us have wills as well as you. Your wife——'

'Leave her alone, Miss Carey, while you are angry. She is dead. That concert helped to kill her. Her body could not stand the intense strain required by her creative power.'

'I am so sorry,' said Joan softly.

'I don't know why we should be sorry. She developed the best in her before she died, and conquered the worst—thank God!'

She gave him a quick look of surprise, to which he replied:

'We live in a Christian country, Miss Joan, and certain forms of speech cling to our tongues from infancy. By the way, I once asked you to tell me what sign of God's rule can be traced in my wife's story. Have you forgotten the question?'

'No.'

'Then can you answer now?'

'He led *you* to her,' answered Joan timidly.

'Was that His doing, Miss Joan?' asked Ellis, flushing slightly.

'Yes.'

'What a child it is, after all,' he said, with irritating calmness.

'You will find out one day that what is good

does come from God,' she retorted rather angrily. 'I know that you are doing splendid work in the world now. I hear about you often, and I expect that success pleases you more than anything else in life. But one day you will not find that enough; you will be dissatisfied with your own strength; you will want something else to worship besides your strong will.'

'But already I am dissatisfied,' he interrupted meekly.

'Then what do you want?' she asked abruptly, for this statement really surprised her.

'Sympathy,' he said.

She reddened.

'Yes, Miss Carey, if you have a little patience with me, you may find that the need for sympathy, which has been mostly unsatisfied since we met, may transform me from the monster whom you fear to——'

'To what?' she asked rather mischievously.

'To the kind of man you can tolerate,' he said humbly.

'You have the world's good opinion,' she said. 'Don't take mine as a criterion.'

'The world may give a little appreciation occasionally,' he said. 'it can never give sympathy.'

‘I must go now,’ said Joan suddenly. ‘We promised to meet near my picture.’

‘One moment. Please tell me what happened to Millicent’s father. The story interests me.’

‘You have no right to ask.’

‘Thank you ; you have answered,’ he said. ‘I saw the entry of his death in the paper.’

‘Millicent believes that his anxiety about her killed him. So it did in a way. He died the night that the baby was born. She called her child Éric.’

‘Her husband did not seek to destroy her faith in her father?’

‘Of course not. Harold would never do anything so mean.’

‘I am glad,’ he said grimly. ‘Now tell me when we shall meet again.’

‘I don’t know ; you had better call on my mother, hadn’t you ? I *must* go now. Good-bye.’

She hurried off to join her friend, telling herself that she had behaved like the veriest school-girl, and ought to be thoroughly ashamed of herself. But all that day she was very much occupied with thinking of Richard Ellis. Again and again Millicent rallied her for being absent-minded. They shopped together, but

Joan showed no interest in their purchases; they lunched together, but Joan was poor company throughout the meal; they went to a matinée, but Joan paid little attention to the performance. Throughout the day she was trying to decide whether or not she wanted to see Ellis again. She hated this man's power, and longed to get away from it whenever she was in his company. Nevertheless, she felt that she must not let him go altogether out of her life. She would like to be a friend to him while he made his way in popular esteem. Joan was certain that he would be famous one day, and she longed to see the effect of his triumphs upon his character. During the past two years she had heard much laudatory criticism of his temperance work, of his practical propaganda, and also of the book in which he examined all the various methods already attempted to make men sober, and synthesized their tendencies and probable results. Joan was sure that Ellis would obtain a seat in the House, and force his way to the front bench by his ability and strength of character. Moreover, he had told her that he liked to talk with her, while with others he was satisfied to exchange words. That little flattering speech clung to

Joan's memory, and gave her exceeding pleasure.

Millicent invited Joan to return home with her to see Eric, and Joan agreed, and then endeavoured to make excuses.

'What is the matter with you to-day?' asked Millicent at length in some exasperation. 'You are so unlike yourself. I have never known you undecided before.'

'I don't know what is the matter with me, I am sure; I feel queer and restless. Do you never feel like that, dear?'

'I did once; Eric cured me. Come and see him; he will make you feel all right in a minute, I am sure.'

Joan did not longer resist Millicent's request; she delighted in seeing her at home, looking joyous and well, surrounded by pretty things, radiating happiness wherever she glanced. On this particular evening she sat in her boudoir dressed in a pale blue tea-gown, and presided over her tea-table with a grace that was irresistible. At her feet played her baby, whose hair and eyes were only a little brighter than her own.

Joan watched the mother and child, and her eyes were full of loving tenderness. It was

good to be in this beautiful room, and to see this pure joy. Here heaven and earth seemed to mingle; here was the kind of life which God meant for *all* His children, although only a few seemed able to evolve it out of the tangled mass of sin and prejudice and misery which they were accustomed to fabricate for themselves. As Joan received her cup of tea from Millicent, she said casually:

‘I saw Richard Ellis at the Academy to-day.’

‘Did you? What a funny way he has of turning up! What did he say for himself?’

‘Not much. He *is* queer, though. I don’t know why; perhaps only because he is different from most people.’

‘Yes; and it is so uncomfortable to be different. I suppose his friends try to make him like the rest of us, or perhaps he has not many friends to worry about him one way or the other.’

‘I think it is rather silly and intolerant to want everybody to be alike,’ said Joan, with some heat.

Millicent looked up surprised.

‘I did not mean to annoy you, Joan; you understand Mr. Ellis and I don’t. Besides, I have not spoken to him for ages. To me he

used to seem self-centred and conceited, but that was probably because he was clever and I was not. I don't understand dreadfully clever people. Harold is only just comfortably clever ; but I don't know how I shall get on with Eric, for he is going to be a genius.'

She drew the baby on to her lap, and made him laugh aloud by swinging him to and fro.

Joan did not remain long with Millicent. As she went home she determined to write that night to Richard Ellis, and tell him that it was better for him not to call.

'It's no use,' she said to herself. 'Father and mother always take their cue from Millicent now, and she could never understand him. His visits would cause friction. So what is the use?'

She wrote to Richard Ellis to say that she was glad to have met him, and to know that he was well. She would never forget that she owed to his encouragement the happiness she derived from her work. She would always watch his movements with interest, and hope for their success. For many reasons, however, she felt that it was best for them not to meet again.


Of course, after this letter was despatched

Joan was full of regrets and remorse. Was her sympathy, then, so much in demand that she should withhold it from this man, who wanted her so much to be his friend? She blamed herself for her unkindness and stupidity, and wished that the post-office—the tomb of so many of our ‘might-have-beens’—would that night yield up its dead.

Yet in the midst of her vexation Joan was proud of the sacrifice she had made to the prejudices of her family. It flattered her vanity to think that she had strength enough to act as they would wish, even though her vision was clearer than theirs. Also she felt relieved to think that she was now out of the range of an influence which she feared. When in contact with other people she knew that she had normal control over her emotions and senses; when with Richard Ellis her self-revelations humiliated her. Yet Richard Ellis interested her more than any other man of her acquaintance.

That night, as Joan lay between sleeping and waking, her thoughts formed themselves into a picture. On a vast barren plain, men were toiling—digging and building in sand. The plain was wrapped in semi-darkness, and the

workers' faces expressed weary hopelessness. Suddenly the picture changed itself into another. Now the atmosphere was bright; the plain was gay with flowers. In the midst of the workers stood one taller and bigger than the rest. To him men looked for guidance and encouragement. To him Joan smiled recognition.



CHAPTER XV

'QUITE a nice party! Really, Joan, I like these artist friends of yours!' said Mrs. Carey one afternoon several months later, as she came into the drawing-room where Joan already sat. They had just returned from an afternoon party, and had not yet removed their hats. 'And I heard nice things about you, my dear,' continued Mrs. Carey. 'You have slaved away for so many years that you thoroughly deserve it.'

'Oh, I've had much more praise than I deserve.'

'I don't see that at all; your friends know what they are talking about. There's that Mr. Fenny who got something into last year's Academy; he said you painted remarkably well for a woman.'

'Did he indeed? I am glad the little wretch did not say that to me; I don't think I could have kept my fingers off his impertinent face.'

‘My dear Joan, how violent you are! I thought you would be rather pleased. He seemed more enthusiastic than any of the others. Certainly Mr. Eclyn said that we should be proud of you one day, but he struck me as rather patronising.’

‘He has every right to be, while Mr. Fenny—— Oh, there’s father! He’s home early.’

George Carey came in ; he was beginning to look rather aged. While it was necessary to struggle to make a position in life no strain seemed to affect him. Now that the struggle was over his face occasionally wore a weary expression, which caused Joan some anxiety. But to-day, in spite of his tired look, he was very cheery.

‘I came home early, for I have good news for you, Joan. A gentleman came to see me at the office this morning about buying that little water-colour of yours which is on view in Manchester—the “Power of Love.”’

‘Who was it—who?’

‘He particularly forbade me to give you his name, and as it is your whim that I should arrange all business details with your customers, I have to meet their wishes as well as I can.’

‘Do I know the mysterious stranger?’

Mr. Carey put his hand on his lips, and said ‘Sealed’ in a solemn voice.

‘Well, and how much is he going to pay?’

‘He paid forty pounds down.’

‘I only asked twenty-five,’ said Joan in a distressed voice.

‘He insisted. He said it was worth a great deal more than fifty pounds to him.’

‘If it was not quite impossible for a piece of romance to enter your life, Joan,’ said her mother, laughing, ‘this might almost be the beginning of one.’

‘I don’t like mysteries,’ said Joan.

‘Well, my dear, in future put your address on the catalogue and deal yourself. I don’t care for the responsibility. Here are the notes.’

Joan took the proffered money, and a glow of pleasure passed through her being. First earnings are very sweet; they seem to add to life’s dignity.

‘Now, father, will you let this make the difference, and decide to go to Florence for our holiday?’

‘With your money? No, Joan! I will send you if you like, and I really think you ought to go for the sake of your art. But business has

not been over bright lately, and we must wait another year for our foreign travels.'

'It will only be the twenty-sixth year of waiting!' interrupted Mrs. Carey gloomily.

'Mummy,' said Joan, going up to her mother impulsively; 'you will let me give *you* this money? I could not go away without you both when I know how much you need the change, and I want to go most dreadfully. So it is really for my pleasure that I ask you to accept these notes.'

She tried to stuff them into her mother's hands.

'No, no, Joan; it's no good. Look at your father's face and you'll see that it isn't. It's one of those questions upon which he has what he is pleased to call "principles," and you could move a mountain more easily than you could move them. His face was enough just now to frighten me to death, for he thought I might possibly be persuaded by you. So it's no use worrying either yourself or me, my dear. Give him the money to bank, and he will be happy, and we will go on enjoying the old life, with the occasional parties and the pleasures which Millicent gives us.'

'Yes, Joan, your mother is right. I *am* firm on this point. I shan't be here for ever, and when

you haven't got me, you may need your savings, or you may be in want. This was one of the conditions, you know, of my allowing you to study.'

'But I can't see why you don't believe that I shall go on earning more and more,' said Joan in a distressed voice. 'Can't you trust me a little?'

'Yes, I can, but I know you will go on wanting more and more; and, knowing this, I can't allow you to think of using your money now unless it is to benefit yourself. You must leave me the privilege of providing your mother's treats; and I mean to take her abroad before she begins to grow old, and so revenge myself on her want of faith.'

He took his wife's heavily ringed hand and patted it playfully.

'Well, George, you must be quick, for I shall grow old very soon now, I can tell you. What can you expect, seeing that I have such a solemn grown-up daughter about me? Well, I must go upstairs and take off my things.'

When Mrs. Carey was gone, Joan placed her hand caressingly on her father's gray head.

'You're looking tired. Been worried?'

'No, dearie. Nothing special, but business *does* bother me a little just now——'

‘ Oh, father, you don’t know how I feel when I see you looking tired. I feel a brute. You have been working always and always for us, and you still go every day to that dull old office, and every day is just like the last.’

‘ No, my dear ; there I differ from you. The business varies a great deal from day to day.’

‘ Well, it *looks* the same always, and I am sure anybody else but you would complain. It *hurts* me to see you like this, and you won’t let me help you.’

‘ But you do help me. I shall be all right when I have been at home for a few minutes. Do you know, dear child, I believe that you feel my tiredness more than I do myself. You bear the pain for me. I am quite happy, excepting for the unsatisfied longing to give your mother all the pleasure she needs.’

‘ If she weren’t my mother, I should say that——’

‘ But as she is—don’t !’ interrupted Mr. Carey sharply.

‘ And you are determined to take none of the money which I don’t want a scrap ?’

‘ Yes, dear, determined—and it’s a good thing for you that I am. I am sure you don’t want a lazy father, and if you don’t leave me a prize

to work for, I shall go all to pieces in a month.'

'Well, here are the stupid old notes; you have made me hate them. Bank them if you want to, and they will never do anybody any good.'

'Then they will differ from the rest of their class,' said George Carey, as he placed the notes carefully in his pocket-book.

'By the way,' he added, 'Richard Ellis came to me to-day. I haven't seen him since we left Hampshire. He has been doing some great temperance work; brought out a book which has excited all the experts; lectured here, there, and everywhere, and got quite a following. I don't know if you ever see notices about him; I do frequently.'

Yes; Joan often saw notices, and knew certainly as much as her father about Richard Ellis.

'I had no idea he would become such a personality,' continued George Carey, without waiting for her reply. 'The wonder is that people seem to listen to him in spite of his objectionable socialistic theories.'

'Did he come to see you about his London work, or is he standing again for the Hampshire seat, and wants some information from you?'

‘Yes ; he is standing again, but he did not come to me for advice. He merely came to tell me of some work of his in London. He has started two halls in connection with two women’s common lodging-houses. It seems that these places have no sitting-rooms ; they merely shelter the wretched creatures by night. Ellis does not think shelter is enough to keep them out of temptation, and so he has opened these halls of entertainment, and the women come to them in the evening before they turn in to sleep. They are in different districts, and open every night in the week. Ellis appears to be the moving spirit of both, and I can well understand that he finds the work absorbing. He wants me to bring you to one of these halls to-morrow night to see what we think of it. Of course, he gets hold of some of the very roughest and saddest creatures in London, but he maintains that even these can be helped if their natural craving for pleasure is satisfied in a wholesome way. Do you feel up to coming ? It will be a novel kind of evening for you, but I believe you will be interested, and I know you are not afraid of experience, even though it may be a bit rough.’

‘I should like to come,’ said Joan ; and she

went quickly out of the room to prepare for dinner.

She was conscious of a sense of excitement all that evening. This could hardly be explained by the nature of the entertainment which was in store for her the next day. But she wanted to see Ellis again to find out how he bore his increasing popularity, and perhaps also to explain away, by her cordial appreciation of his work, the unkind persistency with which she had repelled his advances. She was unable to work throughout that next day, for her strange restlessness made concentration impossible.

At last the long hours dragged themselves out, and she found herself walking with her father from King's Cross Station to the large room in the neighbourhood, where Richard Ellis worked out his theories of social reform.

It was a room filled with chairs of all sorts and kinds, collected by the owner with some pains from all those acquaintances who had a mind to give. The room was long and low. In the windows were some bright flowers; on the small centre table a number of magazines were strewn, and in the corner stood a cottage piano. Richard Ellis was alone when his visitors arrived.

‘How good of you!’ he said cordially, shaking Mr. Carey by the hand; ‘and of you, Miss Carey. I hardly ventured to count on your coming. Visitors are so rare here, and we do appreciate them.’

‘I was *very* glad to come,’ said Joan. ‘I wanted so much to see your club. I have read much about it, but one understands better when one has seen.’

‘Well, I have very little to show, and must rely entirely on your sympathy and imagination if I am to expect your approval. You know what a common lodging-house is; well, I got permission to visit one, and got to know some of the inmates well. I heard some of their stories, and I found that, with few exceptions, they had sunk to the lowest depths, simply because the world had denied them the right to enjoy pure happiness. They could not suppress their natural desires; they found an outlet for them in vice. They never had their chance.’

‘It’s no good, Mr. Ellis. I can’t believe that anybody is forced to sin. It is always voluntary.’

‘Long may you preserve that faith, Miss Joan. It helps some of us who have not got it.’

‘And you are trying to give these poor

people their chance now?' asked Mr. Carey gravely; and Joan was glad that she had not to reply to Ellis.

'It's not the same chance. That is lost. "Too late" is written on most of the faces, as you will see. But here and there we get our opportunity, and to all the women we can say that we are sorry, and we can put into their hearts some longings which may in time crush out the horrible cravings which have been their ruin. But they will be here in a moment, and you won't need my talk.'

'Are you working alone?' asked Joan.

'Oh, certainly not; I have two splendid lieutenants in a city clerk and his wife, both keen musicians, and then four men fresh from the University—one, Grellins, especially—but all good fellows whom I saved from——' Ellis pulled himself up sharply, merely adding: 'I want some more women to help me—— Ah, here our friends come!'

The door opened, and a party of women came into the room. Two were very ragged, and their faces wore dissipated expressions which frightened Joan. Then came a woman with a hard face full of lines. She looked as if she had struggled before she fell, and was

capable of struggling still. Close behind her, with a kind of run, tripped a small being with a large hat and feathers. With nervous hands she tried to keep a well-worn shawl daintily over her shoulders, while she hid herself behind the big woman who had just passed in. Her lips trembled, and she giggled as she glanced round the room, pretending to be coy, but wanting notice. Was it, then, only attention which this poor little person had wanted from the world, and which the world had withheld? Had she got nothing instead?

Joan saw these four women shake hands with Mr. Ellis, and then group themselves round the piano in evident expectation. The flighty little person who had come in last crept to the side, so that she might peep round the piano edge and enjoy a few more antics.

Joan glanced again at the door, and saw a slight girl of about eighteen walk in slowly. She held a baby in her arms, and sat down as soon as possible without saying good-evening. She seemed very weary. She had a sweet, refined face, but she looked very delicate, and the baby on her lap seemed scarcely animate. Joan sat down next to the girl and asked timidly if she liked music.

‘When I gets a chance of hearing it,’ answered the girl. ‘I’ve not been in before ; the others brought me along.’

Joan saw the women round the piano get out from their pockets large hunches of bread and cheese and eat them.

‘Have you brought your supper with you?’ asked Joan of her neighbour.

‘Not to-night,’ answered the girl, clutching her baby almost fiercely.

Joan’s heart sank. Some more women came into the room and began to talk in loud, coarse voices, while they found for themselves comfortable chairs.

A lady, who had apparently entered the room unnoticed, took her seat at the piano and played a lively Russian dance. The coarse voices were not lowered.

‘Stop that!’ cried the hard-faced woman, approaching the noisy group threateningly ; ‘we wants to hear something else besides your jawing. So if you can’t shut up, you can go out.’

‘Hush!’ said Ellis in a conciliatory voice from behind. ‘I am sure you all like singing best ; we shall have some in a moment.’

‘Thank you, sir ; we likes it all—playin’ and

singin' ; it's all one. I don't know what that fat-headed, interferin'——'

The pianist played a loud chord.

Suddenly one of the turbulent women drew a bottle out of her pocket. It was full of brown liquid ; she eyed it critically, but with evident pleasure. Ellis coolly took it from her hands, and, walking up to the window, poured the contents of the bottle into the yard. It was a full minute before the woman could sufficiently recover from her surprise to shower upon him a torrent of abuse. She got up from her seat, and came sufficiently near to Ellis to leave no mistake as to her meaning. The words were inarticulate for a time ; then she seemed to collect herself, and said resolutely :

'I shall have to charge you for that, mister. That wasn't yours to pitch out.'

'Idiot!' said the girl with the baby in an undertone to Joan.

'Don't be angry,' said Ellis cheerfully ; 'I'll pay for what I took. Come to the stall and see what you'll have.'

Joan saw for the first time that in a corner of the room stood a small counter, nicely spread with a white cloth, upon which were temptingly ranged various kinds of food. Behind the

stall stood a young woman waiting for customers.

‘Come along,’ said Ellis; ‘I am sure we shall find something here just to suit your taste, Mrs.——’

‘Tibbins is my name, sir,’ said the woman sullenly; ‘but with your leave I’d rather choose my own supper, and next time you’ll remember that if I prefers my liquor——’

‘I have no right to interfere. Certainly, Mrs. Tibbins, you’re quite correct; I won’t do it again after to-night. But to-night I want you to try my room, and a supper prepared by Mrs. Cross. Another night you can go across the way and have your liquor there.’

Mrs. Tibbins burst into a loud laugh. Then she looked boldly into Ellis’s face, and, with a wink, said:

‘You’re not a two-year-old, you ain’t. You know a thing or two.’

‘Will you try one of our sandwiches, Mrs. Tibbins?’ asked Ellis. ‘I want to get out of your debt.’

‘I don’t mind if I do,’ said Mrs. Tibbins.

Ellis offered her a seat by the stall, and she sat for a few moments munching her sandwich contentedly. She remained silent even while

one of Ellis's friends sang, amid enthusiastic applause, two light opera songs.

Suddenly the piano stopped.

'Not another note unless you help me!' cried the musician. 'Come, friends, lift up your voices!'

Then, amid much laughter, the women gradually joined the easy choruses, led by the strong young voice. Joan saw some faces which had looked a few moments before greedy, cruel, or grimly wretched, soften and become attractive in an atmosphere of innocent fun. The girl next to her had tears in her eyes.

'Don't you like the music?' whispered Joan very softly.

'Oh yes—oh yes! I like it well enough. Only it pulls somewhere here.' She knocked her breast; then, in a hoarse whisper, she added: 'We had a piano at home.'

The room had by this time almost filled. The papers were being looked at, and thrown about somewhat roughly. The chatter was general. Ellis walked about from one group to another, and Joan was surprised to see how merry he was.

'Good-evening all!' called out two newcomers as they closed the door with a bang; 'good-evening, Mr. Ellis!'

'Good-evening, Amelia. I suppose you *can't* remember that the door closes easily,' said Ellis, 'but I should like you to try.'

'Poor old man!' answered Amelia saucily; 'you've told me that before, haven't you?'

'Then why can't you remember?' said her pal.

'Oh, you——' retorted Amelia. '*You're* a nice one to talk.'

Then both girls indulged in loud giggles.

'It's all very well,' shouted Mrs. Tibbins at this juncture, 'but I'm dry; I want some drink, girls!'

A general laugh greeted this proclamation.

'Mrs. Cross is bringing the cocoa,' said Ellis, 'and if you have a ha'penny to spare you shall have some drink.'

'Cocoa!' said Mrs. Tibbins, in a tone which revealed infinite disgust.

'You *wait!*' a neighbour whispered emphatically—'like your betters.'

Ellis approached the place where Joan sat.

'May I get something for you from the stall?' he asked the girl with the baby.

'No, thank you, sir.'

'You've got the baby so tight. Won't you let me look at her?' he said kindly.

‘It ain’t a her; it’s a him, worse luck! So I’s sorry it’s got to die.’

Ellis forced the girl to let him look at the miserable living skeleton she held in her hands.

‘There’s Mr. Ellis holding the baby!’ cried a girl who had been standing for some time with her eyes riveted on Ellis.

They were listless eyes, and the face was lined and shrunken. Her figure alone suggested youth. Her expression was stupid, but she was interested in Ellis.

Two or three matronly women pressed forward to look at the child. Suddenly the girl stood up and faced them angrily, as if they were threatening her and she was standing at bay.

‘What do you want to stare at the kid for?’ she asked. ‘It ain’t yours—it’s mine; and it ’ll die soon, worse luck—and why? ’Cos it wants milk, and I ain’t got none to give ’im—that’s why. It ain’t your fault, and it ain’t mine; so why can’t you leave us alone? I came here for peace.’

She sank on her chair exhausted.

‘I say, sir, I don’t want no drink to-night, nor cocoa neither. Get me a ha’porth of milk for the brat, and please the slip of a mother.’

So spoke Mrs. Tibbins in a loud whisper at Ellis' elbow, and she sniffed vigorously after she had stuffed the copper into his hand. Ellis gave her a bright smile, but she did not notice him. She took hold of the baby, and her sniffs grew in vehemence as she cuddled it closely. There was very little cocoa bought that night. Mrs. Cross was asked to procure a bottle, and the child was fed with milk. The women handed him from one to the other, and rejoiced in their sacrifice.

'Is there a drop over for the gal?' said Mrs. Tibbins at length. 'She could do with some, I'm sure.'

'No! no! no!' shrieked the girl. 'For the child, yes. I take it for him. It's not 'is fault 'e's here. 'E needn't be ashamed, but *I* don't want your *charity*.'

She pressed her lips tightly together, and her eyes flashed. In a moment the hard-faced woman was by the girl's side. In her hand was a silver coin.

'Make them play some music,' she whispered to Joan, 'and take off this starin' lot.'

Joan passed the suggestion on to Ellis, who asked two of his friends to sing a duet. The company pressed up to the piano. The girl

took the baby again in her arms. The hard-faced woman drew her gently to the stall.

'Who's the toff?' asked the girl, glancing towards Mr. Carey, who was standing silently alone in the place where he had stood most of the evening.

'I dunnow.'

'I won't have him feed me; he gave you what you've got in your 'and. He sent you to me——'

'Don't be a fool! 'e's all right.'

'E ain't going to feed me,' persisted the girl. 'Perhaps his son——'

George Carey came up to them.

'I have no son,' he whispered. 'Won't you let me do a little for yours?'

'The baby is fed.'

'But the baby wants its mother to feed,' said George Carey.

'Oh, if you like—if you like,' murmured the girl, and pressed her eyes wearily with her hand, as if to shut out a hideous vision. 'If I hadn't been a coward I wouldn't be here; but the water was so cold, and he spoke smooth, and—and the brat must bear it all.'

'No talk, child!' said the hard-faced woman; 'we know. Look here, do as you're told, and

drink this.' She raised a cup to the girl's lips.

'Where are our singing-gals?' asked Amelia of Mrs. Cross.

'Just you wait. Mr. Ellis has a surprise for you to-night.'

Joan, who had been talking to a group near the piano, looked up and found that Ellis was out of the room. A few minutes later he came in with six girls. They were all dressed in white cotton frocks, and each carried a basket of wild flowers. When they came in, several women clapped their hands.

'Who are these?' whispered Joan to one of her neighbours.

'Friends of Mr. Ellis'. Six dressmaking girls. They've got good places. He teaches them to sing. They come here on Wednesdays. I've never seen them dressed like this afore—and them baskets, too!

'They look like angels,' whispered a weary voice by Joan's side. It came from the girl with listless eyes.

The girls were all about sixteen years of age, and they seemed bursting with eagerness to sing out the joy that was in their hearts.

Someone at the piano played a merry tune,

and six fresh voices gave forth a hymn of praise to the joys of spring and the hopes attending Mother Earth's birthday. Then followed a graceful dance, which was received with vigorous applause. Then, at a sign from Ellis, the girls took the flowers, which were tied in bunches from their baskets, and distributed them among the delighted women. Then the girls went about chatting to the women, and telling them how, on the previous Sunday, Mr. Ellis had taken them for a lovely country walk, and that they had gathered all these flowers themselves, and what trouble they had had to keep them fresh.

'Perhaps Mr. Ellis will take you, too, next Sunday,' whispered a sweet girl to the hard-faced woman. 'He said something about taking the best walkers.'

'Now, my singing-birds,' said Ellis; 'one more song, and then it's closing time.'

The girls stood again in row, and sang an old-fashioned song of peculiar sweetness. After that song, Joan saw smiles on several faces which she had thought old and ugly a little while ago. These smiles did not disappear as the women trooped out, bidding Ellis good-night with much heartiness. Ellis's colleagues

went out to see the women home to the lodging-house, where they had their beds. Before the girl-mother was allowed to leave, Ellis had exacted a promise that she would meet him early the next morning, to see if he could find her some work. Mrs. Cross cleared up preparatory to going home with the singing-birds, who were waiting to hear a new piece played by the clerk's wife.

'May I walk with you to the station, Miss Carey? It's a fine night,' said Ellis, when his visitors seemed ready to leave.

'Ah, there is Grellins back again! Did they all get safely home?'

'Oh yes; but we were anxious about Tibbins,' said the youth.

'Poor soul!' murmured Ellis. 'Will you come with us, Grellins, to the station; it's on your way?'

They passed out into the street, Grellins walking with Mr. Carey, Joan with Ellis.

'Well, and what do you think of the work, Miss Carey?' asked Ellis.

'I should love to help.'

'Did you mean that?'

They were passing a gas-lamp. Joan glanced at Ellis's face. It was very pale, and it wore

an excited expression which frightened her. Among his women he had seemed a tower of self-control.

‘Of course I mean it. Why do you ask?’

‘Because I want to know more. I want to know if you will really help me? Will you join me? Will you give me the right to claim your sympathy now and always?’

He jerked out the words in nervous excitement. Joan trembled. She wished that her father would not walk so quickly.

‘I—I don’t understand what you mean!’ she said; but her heart beat a denial to the truth of her assertion.

‘You do understand; you know you do!’ he cried passionately, and tried to seize her hand, which she withdrew with a swift movement that checked his excitement, and he was able to say calmly what was in his mind.

‘I have no right to speak to you so suddenly,’ he said. ‘I am old enough to know better. But I have loved you so long, Joan! Yes, long before I had a right to love. That evening at the dance—do you remember, nearly four years ago?—under cover of social problems, I spoke to you as a man speaks to a woman only once in his life. Joan, *can’t* you speak to

me now? Can't you tell me if you can trust me?'

She did not answer, and he saw that she was trembling. He continued very gently :

'You once told me that I obeyed no law higher than my will. You did not understand. I obeyed *you*. You made me work and struggle, and try to make life possible for a few other working, struggling people. Every woman I was able to help was helped through you. I first conceived the work of my life when I met Madeline. She roused in me the pity which can induce a man to aspire. He needs a stronger incentive before he can achieve. Will you help me, Joan?'

'I don't know what to say. It's all so terrible.'

'Am I such a terrible being, then—so rough and impossible?'

'Not always; with these women you were gentle enough. I can't think why I am such a coward; but you must let me think—you must give me time.'

He did not speak for a moment; then he said :

'I thought I read a kind of answer in your pictures.'

Joan's cheeks flamed.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked angrily.

‘Simply this: When I saw you first, when I loved you, you had not found yourself. This last conception——’

‘You don’t think I consciously——’

‘No, Joan, no; you spoke your story of self-realization to an audience invisible—unknown, but I dared to hear——’

‘What did you hear?’

‘First the vague appeal of awakening womanhood. You felt a natural craving for love, but you did not know its name. Gradually your spirit learned to control and to direct its craving, and, finally, in your last picture, in that pure, joyous girl’s face, you formulated your claim for love. Your purpose in life was proclaimed. If I go out of your life to-night, you will give and receive love through many channels; if you let me stay—— Oh, Joan, say I may stay!’

She was immensely moved, but only managed to say feebly:

‘I did not think you wanted anything. You are so successful. You seemed to have everything in—in—yourself.’

He laughed mirthlessly.

‘If I ever become complete unto myself, my

work will be ended. Nobody will want me. Can't you trust me, Joan?

'Oh, let me think!' she said hurriedly. 'Let me go home. Leave me alone. You understand I have said nothing. I must think.'

'All right, dear. I won't press you until you give me leave. I won't even see you. I won't——'

At that moment Mr. Carey turned back to say something about the beauty of the night. Ellis answered quite naturally, but Joan did not speak.

The last glimpse Joan had of Ellis that night was when he called through the carriage-window to Mr. Carey to be sure to sleep, because his daughter was tired and should be allowed to rest. There was a strength about his calm which gave Joan confidence, even while it seemed far beyond her reach.



CHAPTER XVI

THE next day was Sunday. Joan was up very early, and, having left a note at home to the effect that she was breakfasting with Estelle Melline, she hurried out to find her friend.

Estelle was in her dressing-gown, flitting about her room, trying to find a place to put her mirror, for she wished to make a study of her own head, and for that purpose must see it in a good light.

When Joan came in, Estelle pressed her left hand into her visitor's with effusion.

'So glad you have come. One minute, dear,' she said. 'I have a plan. Sit down and pour yourself out some coffee. There are two cups.'

Estelle darted to a corner of the room hitherto untried. Joan sipped the coffee, and was as interested in her friend's movements as her own impatience would allow. The little room was daintily tidy, and the many-coloured

sketches on the wall made it look gay and attractive. The bed was curtained off with a pretty pink chintz. This was the only expression of luxurious taste on the part of the owner; for the floor was bare, and the table and chairs of the most unpretentious formation possible. Some lilies stood on the table next to the breakfast-tray. Suddenly Estelle darted up to these flowers, and, with the impetuosity which distinguished all her movements, opened her window and threw them ruthlessly into the yard.

‘They are still quite fresh,’ remonstrated Joan.

‘They are not wanted. Ernest did not come.’

‘But they are so bright. It seems a pity to throw them away.’

‘They belong to Ernest. Standing there they remind me that he did not come to take them. But I shall get more to-morrow.’

‘Why, to-morrow is Monday.’

‘I know, I know. But something tells me that Ernest will come to-morrow. That’s why I want to work all this day at my head. It will amuse Ernest. When we were children and he saw that I did not grow, he had his revenge by calling me dreadfully ugly. I knew I wasn’t, and pretended not to care, but I had many a good cry in secret about his teasing. This

study shall welcome him home. It shall be called "The Ugly Duckling's Welcome." But where shall I put the mirror now?

Joan made a few suggestions, and at last the position was fixed.

'You're an angel, my dear Joan!' said Estelle enthusiastically. 'You have just given me the help I wanted. Now, you won't mind my working, will you? The day goes so fast, and I have so much to do.'

While she spoke, she gave some funny little darts in order to catch a clear reflection of herself in the mirror. She collected her paints round her, and began to work. Then she glanced at Joan, and said archly :

'It's not a good Sunday work to paint one's self, is it, my friend? When one paints things beautiful, one is saying one's prayers, quite as well as in your churches. But the "Ugly Duckling," I should not have done her on a Sunday; but then she is for Ernest, and he comes to-morrow, and it will amuse him. You are *sure* you don't mind my working?' continued Estelle rather wistfully.

'Quite sure. It's easier to talk to you when you are not looking at me, Estelle.'

'Well, I am *dying* to know about yesterday

Tell me quickly.' Estelle stuffed a long brush in her mouth. 'Be quick,' she continued, 'before I get bad tempered. This sort of work makes me cross.'

'I was most interested yesterday. It is wonderful work, and you would never know Mr. Ellis if you saw him among his women.'

'Very likely not, my dear, for I have not the pleasure of his acquaintance.'

'But even if you had,' said Joan, with some impatience. 'He is so gentle and considerate, so kind.'

Estelle glanced quickly at her friend.

'And you think he helps these poor things—that it really makes a difference to them to sit there together and hear music? You are convinced?'

'Yes, yes!' said Joan eagerly. 'The homeliness and brightness of the place and *his* sympathy must influence them. They can't help themselves.'

'And your father—did he like it, too?'

'Yes; he was much impressed. He thought Ellis's manner of work so excellent.'

Estelle laughed.

'What is the matter?' asked her friend rather abruptly. 'I don't see why you are amused.'

‘My poor Joan!’ said Estelle, vigorously squeezing a tube of colour on to the canvas before her. ‘I ask about the work; you tell me of the man. But you are right—I am silly to be amused. It’s always the same, isn’t it, my Joan? It is always the worker who makes the work. When later you come to admire this study above all my work that you have seen, you will admire Estelle Melline, your friend, more than you ever thought you did.’

‘In work of the sort I saw yesterday the personal influence is the essential part,’ said Joan sententiously.

‘Yes, yes, I know; go on. But it’s not only in that work, don’t you understand, that the *man* matters. It’s the same in everything. Work is always man’s form of expression; and when we find a piece of work empty, it’s because the man was empty who did it. And his people seem to care for Mr. Ellis?’

‘Yes, yes. And he is so gentle to them and so merry in his manner of talking; so responsive and so sympathetic.’

‘And he has imagination, too; that must count for so much. These women have become so real; their pains and troubles and appetites are just what they are, and nothing less. They

stand up in the poor creatures' way and make progress impossible. Without imagination they can't get over these realities. Perhaps Mr. Ellis helps them to fly.'

The little woman sighed, and regarded herself in the glass somewhat ruefully.

'Yes. Do you know, Estelle, I was surprised myself at the originality of Mr. Ellis's efforts. I did not think pretty fancies were in his line, but even there he was successful. The master touch in the evening's entertainment was the introduction of six young girls dressed in white with wild flowers in their hands. They distributed these flowers among the company, and they danced and sang; and their gaiety and purity must have suggested better times to the poor tired women. They helped me, too.'

'Yes,' said Estelle rather wearily; 'it was a pretty idea.'

'I am afraid I am terribly in your way, dear,' said Joan apologetically. 'I will go.'

'No; you have more to tell. Estelle Melline is a fool, and she can't paint her ugly duckling. But go on.'

'It's dreadfully difficult to paint one's self. It was ambitious of you to try,' said Joan. 'I once attempted it; in fact, I struggled with

myself for several hours. At the end I nearly broke the mirror in my rage.'

'How did Mr. Ellis behave to you, Joan?' asked Estelle.

'He—he was very nice—at least, of course, while we were in the club-room, he had no time for talk; but he walked with us to the station, and then——'

'He was very nice?' said Estelle, turning round to her friend, and her eyes danced with fun.

Happily, Joan was inspecting the seam in her skirt, and did not know that Estelle was amused at her expense.

'Yes; much, much nicer than I ever thought possible. You know, Estelle, what I used to feel about him. His curious domineering manner always made me impatient with myself. I was afraid to be with him for long at a time. He always annoyed me so much and even frightened me, though why I can't think.'

'And last night?'

'Well, I was still a little frightened; he was still rather domineering, but I——'

'You were not annoyed?'

'No—I—was—— Oh, Estelle, can you believe it possible? He loves me.'

After making this confession, Joan seemed to forget herself, and the consideration she owed to her friend's work. She seized the little woman round the waist, and forced the palette and brush out of her hands. Then she sat down on the floor, and drew Estelle into a sitting posture by her side. Estelle offered no resistance. She took Joan's hand in hers and looked away, so that the girl might speak more easily.

'It does seem too wonderful for anything, Estelle, but if you had heard him you would know that he was sincere. I always thought he needed *nobody*. He worked so splendidly, and did just what he wanted. But he says that he has loved me for a long, long time, and that he cannot go on without my help and sympathy. Oh, Estelle, you don't know how lovely it is to be wanted as much as that!'

No, Estelle did not know, but her eyes, which were turned away, glistened with tears.

'And you said——?' she asked softly.

'I said he must wait and give me time to think. I could not decide straight off like that. I was much too surprised. He promised not to worry me till I told him he might, and I want your advice.'

‘My advice about what?’

Estelle’s eyes were dry now, and they merely expressed surprise as she turned them to her friend.

‘About accepting him, of course.’

‘Oh yes, of course;’ and Estelle gave an irritating little laugh.

‘If I write to him he will come to-morrow to ask mother’s and father’s permission, but if I don’t write——’

‘Yes?’

‘Then he won’t come,’ said Joan lamely. ‘But, Estelle, I do seriously want your advice. What does this fear mean? Will it go if I marry him? I simply couldn’t live always with a person who made me want to run away. It would be intolerable. Shall I be able to soften his domineering way, and——’

‘Are you sure that he loves you?’ asked Estelle.

‘Yes, of course; he left no doubt.’

‘And of your own love, are you sure?’

‘When he isn’t there, yes; but when I am with him—— Oh, Estelle, isn’t it dreadful to be uncertain like this? I believe that if *you* would only explain this fear,’ she added plaintively, ‘I should see my way clearly.’

‘But the feeling is such a mixed-up thing, and I’m not a philosopher, you know,’ said Estelle, laughing. ‘I expect, though, that it only comes because when you are with him you want so much to care for him yourself, and to be appreciated by him in his turn, and these wants make you self-conscious and timid.’

‘Very likely, yes. Till last night it humiliated me to think that I cared about his opinion——’

‘And last night?’

‘Well, of course, if a person cares for one as much as Richard Ellis does, it seems ungrateful and absurd, doesn’t it, Estelle?’

‘Yes; and perhaps the fear only came to your heart yesterday by force of habit. It was probably not real, because you understood him. Then, again, I expect Ellis has very bad manners, and is domineering, and conceited, and obstinate.’

‘I don’t see how you can tell,’ said Joan, relaxing the hand which lay in her lap.

‘My poor Joan, I am a tease; but never mind. I believe you will lose the dread when you live with him and get accustomed to him. If he loves you as you say he does, you will manage him.’

‘You think it’s all right, then, Estelle; you

are sure?' asked Joan, her cheeks flaming with excitement; and she hugged her friend so vigorously that it seemed as if she would certainly crush the little woman. 'Then I may——'

'Post the letter that is in your pocket? Yes, my little Joan, I think you may.'

'How did you know?' asked Joan indignantly, and she lifted herself from the floor and turned from her friend. There was a sob in her voice as she said: 'You were laughing at me the whole time.'

'Oh, my poor Joan, don't I understand?' said Estelle gently. 'I play comedy, too, when I have the chance.'

Joan turned. She looked into Estelle's face and laughed heartily. Estelle moved tentatively towards her palette.

'Yes, I have been horribly selfish, I am afraid, and have taken up *hours* of your time. I will go now, and you will forgive me? I will never be so horrid again.'

'Yes, yes, I forgive you,' said Estelle, patting her friend's arm. 'If it wasn't for to-morrow I shouldn't mind, but I must work as hard as I can to get ready.'

She glanced round the room nervously, and her hands twitched in their eagerness for work.

Joan kissed her affectionately, and, thanking her for all her sympathy, withdrew.

* * * * *

On the following night Joan sat up waiting for Dick French. He was spending his holidays with the Careys, and that night after dinner, Joan had sent him with a note to Estelle Meline. She wanted her friend to have a special piece of news that very night, and Dick was the only available messenger. Also Joan, in the intensity of her happiness, wished that all her friends should be happy, too, and in her excitement she had pictured Ernest's return, and hardly wanted Dick's assurance to convince her of its reality. But, alas! our friends' destinies are not controlled by our wishes on their behalf, and Joan had soon to learn that Estelle had once more waited and hoped in vain. She opened the door to Dick before he rang the bell, for she heard his step outside.

'Well, what did she say?' she asked.

'She sent her best love, and said she was very, very glad. I say, have you got some supper?'

'There are some cakes in your room. But what else did she say?'

'She said that twice——'

‘And nothing else?’

‘No; she seemed down on her luck. I had only seen her twice before, and she had struck me as a particularly cheery person, but to-night she seemed fairly wretched, and looked ill, too. ‘You’d better go and see her to-morrow, Joan.’

‘Yes, I will. Poor Estelle! She was alone, I suppose?’

‘Yes; that’s why I stopped,’ he said patronizingly. ‘I let her show me some pictures she had on her table in a portfolio. She said they were her brother’s pictures. She was looking at them when I came in.’

‘Did you like them?’ asked Joan.

‘Well, I tried to like them, just to please her.’

Joan tried to hide a smile. Dick’s taste in art had hitherto not been seriously appreciated.

‘They were rather dauby, I think; but there was more colour in them than one sees in your things.’

‘And you like colour, Dick?’ said Joan, taking the boy’s arm, and walking upstairs with him.

‘Yes, I like the things bright,’ he said. ‘If I painted I should stick the colour on thick out of the tubes. I’m sure the effect would be good.’

‘Well, you were awfully good to go for me

to-night to Estelle, and I'll remember your advice when I start my next picture.'

'Yes, you'd better,' said Dick, laughing. 'I'm an authority, I can tell you; you're in luck.'

They had reached the first landing, and were standing outside Joan's room.

'I say, Dick, I want to tell you something, but don't laugh—I'm going to be married.'

'*You?* I say, Joan!'

'Yes, it's quite true. Are you surprised?'

'When will the wedding be? I mean—who's the man?'

'Richard Ellis!'

Dick whistled.

'Do you remember him?'

'Yes; the Hampshire fellow!' answered the boy rather gloomily.

'You'll like him no end, Dick, when you know him. He's clever and strong—a real *man*.'

'Oh, yes, I expect he's all right; but I thought you would not have time to get married, like other girls; you always seemed so busy.'

Joan laughed.

'I found the time, you dear, funny old thing—or Mr. Ellis found it for me.'

‘Well, good-night. You’re such a brick, you know, Joan ; I *hope* it’ll be all right.’

‘Why, of course it will!’ cried Joan, and, giving the boy a hug—which under the special circumstances he did not resent—she darted into her room and banged the door.

She heard him whistle between his teeth as he stood outside, considering her surprising piece of news. Then he went off to his room to see what cakes Joan had prepared for him.

CHAPTER XVII

‘JOAN dear, is it *really* true?’ said Millicent on the following afternoon, as, looking radiant in a pretty hat and jacket, she came into the Careys’ library, where Joan was waiting for her. She seized both her friend’s hands, and kissed her with much affection.

‘Yes, dearest,’ said Joan ; ‘it is quite true, although it seems so wonderful.’

‘How long have you known?’ asked Millicent, her voice trembling with excitement.

‘Just two days and three nights. He told me that evening when we went to his recreation room.’

‘But how long have *you* known?’

‘My answer, you mean?’

‘Of course I mean that.’

Joan bent down and picked up a scrap of paper, which had tactfully placed itself under the table. While her face was hidden she answered :

‘When I came to look I found my answer

quite ready. I believe it must have been prepared years ago and have got buried. But I dragged it out, and was ever so glad. Do you understand ?

‘Of course, dear. When I wanted my “yes” for Harold—it came very easily, too—I found that it was packed away all ready, but only to be used on demand. Uncle seems very pleased about you, Joan. He came round last night and told us himself.’

‘Yes. He got to know Richard that night at the club. He was on my side immediately.’

‘Poor Joan!’ said Millicent, stroking her friend’s hand with her delicately gloved one ; ‘I fear that Auntie took some time to convince.’

‘No ; she did not take long, for the whole thing was decided in a few hours ; but I did so want her to consent because she approved, not because her queer daughter had made up her mind, and must be allowed to have her own way. It was probably unreasonable of me to expect as much as I did.’

‘Well, I hope everybody will understand and approve in *time*,’ said Millicent, with a nervous catch in her voice.

A wave of resentment came over Joan. She had never felt the like before towards Millicent.

But her habit of keeping a strong hold on *essentials* helped her now. She knew that her friendship with Millicent had hitherto been the most important factor in her life's happiness. If she allowed Harold's dislike for Ellis to become a source of annoyance to her, this friendship would be gradually undermined.

So, gulping down a something which had leaped into her throat, she said :

'You must not worry about other people's approval. Only trust me and love me always ; you'll see for yourself that I am happy.'

'Of course, dear—of course ! As if anything could make me misunderstand you, Joan !'

Joan looked into the beautiful true eyes of her friend, and promised to take the blame on herself if any influence came to disturb their perfect confidence.

Through the half-open window a child's cry was heard, and both girls looked out. The cry came from baby Eric, who, on his way to fetch his mother, had been allowed to run a little way, while his nurse pushed his mail-cart. She was a few yards in front of him, when a strange dog came up, and caused the child considerable alarm by playfully rubbing himself against him, and sniffing at his little hand.

‘It’s Richard’s dog. He’s a most gentle creature,’ said Joan, ‘only so large. Look at Eric! He has turned round and is running as fast as his legs can tear. Of course the dog thinks he is playing, and is running too, frightening him all the more.’

‘Nurse! nurse!’ called Millicent in an anxious voice through the open window.

The nurse turned and realized the situation ; but Richard had seen first. He took Eric into his arms, and began talking to him hard. Millicent and Joan could not hear what he was saying, but evidently Eric was impressed. The nurse watched in some alarm, for Ellis was a stranger to her. At last Eric was put on his feet again, and he forthwith stroked the great dog, which a few moments before had caused him so much terror. Then, with one hand on the dog’s collar and the other placed confidently in the hand of his protector, Eric walked up the steps of the house. He reached his mother in breathless excitement, and began a long, incoherent speech, in which the words ‘Uncle Wichard’ alone were distinguishable.

It was the first time that Millicent had met Ellis since Joan had given her reply, and it was mainly because of her baby’s introduction that

her greeting and congratulations were warm and sincere. Afterwards, when Millicent had gone, Joan said to Ellis :

‘ It was wise of you to make a conquest of Eric. Now the road is clear ; you will be able to carry Millicent by storm. If it wasn’t for your horrid will, though, I don’t think you could have made a panic-stricken child pet the object of his terror. I don’t know if I ought to be glad when you show signs of your terrible masterfulness.’

‘ Seeing that I only exert it, madam, in order to make your friends tolerate me, I hardly think that you have a right to complain.’

‘ But when they are subdued, you will exert your will to crush me, won’t you, dear?’ continued Joan, laughing. ‘ But I know that I shan’t be troubled for some time ; in fact, you will be almost tired out by the time that you have won them all over. There is Harold, for example. You’ll need to do a lot of willing before you can get him round.’

‘ Well, dearie, if you wish it I will try Harold along with the rest ; but do you really think we need trouble about the husband of your foster-sister, who, excepting in his marriage, is a martyr on the altar of bad taste?’

‘Don’t begin by being so dreadfully meek and pathetic,’ said Joan ; ‘you won’t be able to keep it up. Seriously, when you come to see how straight and really nice Harold is, you will appreciate him, and——’

‘Quite right, my dear, we will wait ; there is no hurry,’ said Richard complacently. Then he drew his chair quite close to hers, and they began to talk of the things they cared for most.

That night Ellis and Joan went out to see Estelle.

‘She will be so pleased,’ Joan had told him, ‘and I know you will like her. She is alone, and such a dear.’

Ellis rang the top bell of the grim old house in Golden Street, Bloomsbury, twice.

‘I fear she must be out,’ said Joan ; ‘I *am* disappointed.’

But at last they heard the noise of little feet on the stairs, and the next instant the door was opened.

Estelle surprised her friend by seizing both her arms, and knocking Joan’s elbows against her sides, saying ‘Ah!’ several times rapturously. Her black eyes were almost aflame with joy.

‘There is no doubt that Estelle approves of

our happiness, Richard,' whispered Joan. 'We have not had a welcome like this elsewhere.'

Estelle's laugh rang in merry peals.

'It's not only that. You come upstairs and see.'

The little woman rushed up in front of them. Joan, feeling rather silly, whispered to Ellis :

'I believe the long-lost brother must have returned. 'I told you about him, didn't I?'

'Yes,' said Ellis.

'I never believed in his reality,' continued Joan.

'Your friend certainly does,' he answered.

As Estelle opened the door, a tall man got up from the one comfortable chair which the room contained, and bowed low to the visitors. Then he sat down again. He had the conventional blue eyes, the colourless, pointed beard, and the shabby velveteen coat of French artists of a certain order.

'He's come,' said Estelle, with a little spring of delight. Then, trying to be very grave, she formally introduced them.

'My sister has spoken much about her friend,' said Ernest, with another bow to Joan. 'I am deeply honoured to make your acquaintance.'

He spoke English perfectly, but his French accent was strongly marked.

'I hope you intend to remain in London now,' said Joan, a slight note of resentment in her voice. 'Your sister has waited so long for you.'

'My plans are unsettled, but I will remain so long as I can to look after her,' he said, with a grand manner, which was really irritating.

'Think of his coming back on a Tuesday, too, when I had promised myself not to expect him for five whole days,' said Estelle. 'No flowers, no anything. He was just sitting here when I came home, and I nearly died of joy. It *was* a welcome, wasn't it, Joan?'

'Was the "Ugly Duckling" ready?'

'No, not even that. It should have been, and it was really quite good; but I was in a temper yesterday—in an *awful* temper—and I scraped it out. But it doesn't matter now—nothing matters.'

Estelle gave a gasp of satisfaction as she curled herself up on a footstool near her brother's armchair. He patted her head patronizingly.

'My little sister was always fanciful,' he said.

'Have you had much success in Paris?' asked Ellis.

He felt that he must say something if possible to prevent Joan from exploding. She looked on the verge of a catastrophe. This humbug was almost too much for her self-control.

‘He hasn’t exhibited, and he has not sold very much,’ answered Estelle immediately, ‘but what work he has done is magnificent’; and she laughed a little hysterically. Then she crept to Joan and whispered audibly: ‘Ernest was never the sort to work. One must not expect that. He is a genius. Few people would understand if he did show his work.’

The artist was by no means disconcerted by being called a genius.

‘I am sorry that Estelle’s work has not progressed more; she should have more training,’ he said.

‘But she couldn’t *starve* in the meantime,’ snapped Joan.

Estelle shook her friend’s knee.

‘Hush! hush! my dear; Ernest does not like that talk. It worries us both.’

‘I had not heard from my sister for some years,’ said Ernest in a rather injured voice; ‘I often wondered how she was faring. An old acquaintance whom I met by chance in

Paris gave me her address, and I came as soon as possible to see her. I am not at all pleased with the work she is doing; we must change all that.'

'Is he not superb?' said Estelle in a delighted voice.

'Then you *do* intend to remain here? Or perhaps you will take your sister back to Paris, and make a home for her there?' said Ellis, who was somewhat oppressed with the difficulty of making conversation.

'My plans are unsettled,' he said, once more, with dignity. 'But I think my sister would like to see Paris. Would you not, little one?'

Estelle glanced from her brother to Ellis, and pursed up her lips as if she were trying hard not to laugh.

'Yes, yes, Ernest; you had better take me, and let me have my training in an atelier. It is a pity I am so old,' she added.

'I think, my dear,' said Richard at last, 'that we ought not to intrude here longer to-night. I am sure mademoiselle has much to hear, and also to tell her brother.'

A troubled look came over Estelle's face.

'Oh, stay—stay a little longer,' she said; then she glanced anxiously at her brother.

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Both Joan and Richard felt mystified ; they did not know that the poor little woman was in mortal terror lest her brother should escape, and fancied that her friends could help her to retain him. 'Ernest always liked company,' continued Estelle piteously. Then, suddenly jumping to her feet, she exclaimed : 'Oh, what a little silly Estelle Meline is to be sure ! There is the wine !'

In great excitement she hurried to her chest of drawers, and rummaged till she found her keys. Then she unlocked a small cupboard in the corner of the room, and, throwing open the door, revealed a champagne bottle and two glasses. These stood in solitary grandeur.

'I bought these years ago, when I had my first rise,' said Estelle, laughing. 'I was extravagant in my choice. But it was better to be even a little hungry and to know I was quite ready for Ernest.'

'What a child it is !' said the hero, smiling with some condescension. 'Can I find two more glasses for you, my sister ?'

'No ; we must use ordinary glasses,' said Estelle.

'Can't I go out and get the proper ones ?' he asked.

‘No, no; Joan will excuse us,’ she said persuasively.

‘We have no right to be here at all,’ said Joan.

‘But it is a splendid opportunity for us to drink *your* health, too. My friend is engaged to Mr. Ellis, Ernest love.’

Ernest bowed his congratulations. Then, while her brother opened the bottle, Estelle whispered to Joan :

‘You understand that I am absorbed to-night, but I am not less glad about you.’ Then, drawing her friend on one side and looking up into her face, she added : ‘When your happiness was settled, but he’—looking in her brother’s direction—‘gave no sign, I was horribly jealous. I can’t bear to remember what wicked thoughts I had. I am ashamed of them now. Can you forgive me?’

‘My dear,’ said Joan, and bent down and impulsively kissed her friend.

‘Are you ready, Estelle?’ said Ernest. ‘Have you a cloth and biscuits?’

‘Yes, yes; wait one minute.’

‘Are you quite happy to-night?’ whispered Joan, as she saw Ernest take Ellis up to examine one of the sketches on the wall, and

thought she might use her opportunity to chat a little longer to her friend.

‘Yes, of course—only the dreadful anxiety,’ replied Estelle.

‘About what?’

The little woman’s face became very white as she whispered:

‘I don’t like him to go out. Where can he lodge? He must go. How can I be sure about to-morrow?’

‘The wine will spoil, my sister. Come! the biscuits and the cloth.’

In a moment Estelle had pulled herself together. She made all necessary preparations, and the wine was drunk amid much ceremony and bowing on the part of the Frenchman.

‘Richard, can you recommend Mr. Meline any lodging in the neighbourhood?’ said Joan; and her eyes telegraphed a message which Richard understood. Moreover, he had seen Estelle’s pitiable anxiety when she sought to prevent her brother from going out to buy champagne glasses for the company.

‘If monsieur will so far honour me, I can give him a room in my lodgings,’ he said; ‘I have always a spare room.’

‘Thank you! thank you!’ cried Estelle,

clapping her hands with the unrestrained joy of a child.

Ernest, however, could not afford to jeopardize his dignity.

'Impossible, sir,' he said; 'I should be inconveniencing you.'

'On the contrary,' said Ellis, 'you would be doing me a favour'; and he wickedly imitated the Frenchman's bow, much to Joan's amusement. 'I will leave you two to gossip a little longer,' he continued, 'while I take Joan home. Then I will come back to fetch your brother, Mademoiselle Melline.'

The little woman squeezed Richard's hands with a grateful effusion which was very pathetic.

'I am glad to get out,' said Joan, as Estelle's door closed behind them. 'Poor Estelle!'

'The brother is a charlatan,' said Ellis. 'Estelle sees through him in a way, too, but she has, nevertheless, inordinate faith in him.'

'I fear he won't stop with her. It was very good of you to take him in to-night, but you can't keep him for ever.'

'No, I fear he *will* disappear before long; but if he leaves her faith unimpaired, I don't think we shall have much to regret.'

'I can't understand how Estelle manages to

keep up her delusions about him, especially as I think, with you, that she is conscious all the while of her self-deception. I could not live a minute in a fool's paradise of that kind. I must be entirely sincere in my faith.'

'Yes ; that's what makes me a scrap anxious about the future, dearest. I am so little worthy of the trust you want to give me.'

'But *I* am not even a *scrap* afraid about anything,' she said exultantly ; and her words echoed in her brain and awoke a memory there. She laughed out into the darkness.

'What amuses you, my dear ?'

'Nothing ; only I am so happy!' she said.

And they walked home in silence, while Joan's heart sang a hymn of thankfulness.

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CHAPTER XVIII

ESTELLE MELLINE was sitting in her little room with a piece of charcoal and a sketching-block in her hand. She was scribbling rapidly. Suddenly she tore off a sheet of her block, crushed it between her fingers, and, throwing it into a distant corner of the room, laughed aloud.

‘I am spending my evening in very exclusive society,’ she thought; ‘even my language is my own! I defy anybody to understand these drawings; but they mean a great deal.’

She began scribbling again.

‘She’s been married nearly two years now, poor little Joan, and they are happy—quite happy. But the painting—oh, the painting! But, never mind; when she does get to that again she will find that she has improved much. This life, full of great, big projects for the

welfare of the world, will stretch out my little Joan ; her painting dreams are growing with the rest of her, and when she comes to put them on to her canvas—well, we shall see.' Estelle paused in her scribbling, and put her charcoal dangerously near her lips as she meditated. 'Do I like her man, Richard Ellis?' The charcoal was made to describe some weird circles in the air. 'Yes, *quite!* I like his fire ; he burns always—always, and always gets more fuel and is never satisfied with his flame. What drives him on, I wonder? He knows no limit, he has no fixed standard. He uses Joan's love and sympathy, the world's approbation, his own success, for fuel. They make the flame to burn stronger and stronger, and the altar of humanity can hold all of it. There is no rest, no rest, little Joan, for either of you. The flame is licked up, more fuel is added, and the burning must go on for ever.'

Estelle bent again over her block, and produced a young man eating an ice. His appearance recalled Harold French, and she laughed again.

'Yes, my dear, there is little infinitude about you, is there? You have your standards, respectable, honourable, indeed, and when you

have reached them you are happy. There is plenty of rest about you, and content, and all the beautiful things men write sermons about. But when you die, my dear, they will have to compensate you for some of that painless joy which has kept your doors shut. You have not had your proper share of man's inheritance, Harold; your eyes are closed to the supreme beauties which lie beyond the actual. You are *comfortable*. And even the lovely Millicent and the baby son can't make up to you for the loss of the beyond. You are given Esau's pottage, and can enjoy every scrap of it without interruption; but the pain of Jacob's dream belongs to other, happier men.'

Estelle sprang from her chair.

'I must get dressed,' she said to herself; 'Joan is coming for me to take me to that wonderful meeting. I am to hear her Dick make a great speech. She thinks I like hearing speeches!'

A few minutes later Joan knocked at the door, and hardly waited Estelle's call before hurrying into the room.

'Good-evening, dear; we must be quick. Dick is waiting for us near the station. Why, what's the matter, Estelle? You've been crying!'

'I'm in a sentimental mood, Joan. The speeches will cure me.'

'Any news?'

'No. Ernest is going to wait till he is famous before he writes. It is only six months since his last letter.'

'I hope he won't ask for money again during the waiting interval,' thought Joan; but she pitied her friend's efforts at self-deception too much to interfere with them.

She drew the little woman's hand under her arm.

'You are ready, are you not, Estelle? Let us go.'

Estelle smiled up into Joan's face. Her eyes were full of light; indeed, her inheritance knew no boundaries, for it stretched as far as human love can stretch, out of this world of duty, intellect, sorrow, and disappointment, into the world of perfect love and perfect beauty.

'I thought you were going to be late,' said Estelle, as they hurried down the street towards the station, where Ellis was waiting for them.

'Yes. Somebody was kind enough to tell mother that a row was expected at the meeting to-night, and both she and Millicent were alarmed.'

‘And you took a long time to soothe them?’

‘Yes. Father helped me by coming in at the right moment, and his calm assurance had the usual effect.’

‘Your mother beat herself against it for a time and then rested on it, and Millicent gave way quickly, because she saw you were eager for the meeting, and she likes everybody to do what they want to do most.’

‘Yes. Dear Millicent!’ said Joan, with a sigh of content. ‘She grows more beautiful every day, and Eric’s needs seem to increase her wisdom and strength of love. She is growing far more quickly than her baby. I think she is perfect as a mother.’

‘Yes; and her success had its roots in her father’s failure. Her hope was kindled by his despair.’

Joan’s thoughts flew back to a scene in a cottage-garden, where a fair-haired child was playing with broken geranium stalks. ‘I’s *pretending*,’ Joan heard her say. ‘Of course, if I *can* get the stalk straight, perhaps God ’ll make it grow.’

Then Joan thought of her husband, and of his life with Madeline and his work among the broken pieces of humanity which crossed his

path, and she began to walk so fast that Estelle had difficulty in keeping up with her. A tingling wave of joyous hope passed through her being, and seemed to push her forward.

It was the eve of a General Election, and Ellis had promised to take the chair at a meeting in a poor district of London, when Carlton, the Independent Temperance Candidate, intended to make his final appeal to the electors.

As Richard mounted the platform he whispered to Joan, who walked by his side :

‘ I hear the publicans have organized a row to-night. We may be rather lively.’

‘ I heard something about it, too,’ answered Joan.

The hall was crammed, and as the speakers took their seats the audience rose and sang ‘ He’s a jolly good fellow !’ in boisterous voices.

Richard sat looking with interested eyes at the men and women ranged in front of him. The types had become very familiar to him in his long campaign. There was the man in the white coat, who saw all the jokes first, and started the ripple of laughter, which was taken up here and there until it resolved itself into a roar. There was the toothless old gentleman

who never smiled, but always continued the applause after everyone else had ceased clapping ; near him sat the man in the brown coat, with his two hands resting heavily on his walking-stick, his body half raised, his face cocked up, his lips pressed together, looking as if he were waiting his opportunity to give the other side of the question. There was the woman who brought her hapless baby to every meeting, but was invariably turned out before proceedings were half over, because the child's protests disturbed the rest of the company. There was the youth with the slightly open mouth, whose face framed a perpetual query. In front of him sat the bustling woman worker, with black bag and umbrella. There, too, was the young man who never believed what people said until he had tested the truth of their words for himself.

Richard looked at these and the many other familiar faces in front of him, while the candidate, whom he had briefly introduced, addressed the meeting.

'It's wonderful,' thought Ellis, 'how they come time after time to hear words about temperance. Carlton is revealing to them his

deepest convictions. Do they hear anything but words? He is putting forth ideas, the result of slow, patient thought. As they sit there so attentively, what do they grasp besides the sound of his eloquence?’

Ellis glanced at his wife. She was evidently impressed, as she sat with hands clasped closely together on her lap and eyes riveted on the speaker. It was her way to be hopeful. She believed in the power of words, and in the certainty of every man's redemption. She was a beginner in social work. Ellis was tired and in a cynical mood. He had been annoyed that afternoon, and felt altogether out of sorts.

‘What was the use of speechifying on the eve of action? They ought to be collecting votes, not scattering phrases. He wished Carlton would stop. They had all read or heard what he had to say.’

But Carlton would not stop. Joan had never heard anything so eloquent as his speech to-night. She listened with rapt attention, and heard a note of inspiration in his voice as he spoke of the England of the future—a temperate England, devoting herself to the service of humanity. He implored the working men and

women of the country to throw off the tyranny which controlled their lives, and to govern their country for themselves, instead of laying their heads under the publicans' yoke — to demand the rights of manhood, the right to work and to enjoy the wages of work, to rejoice in their own powers, and to praise God for His gifts.

Those who heard applauded loudly, and Joan fancied that a refining wave of earnest aspiration passed over the faces in front of her. She felt herself being worked up into a state of wild enthusiasm, and was conscious of a burning desire to give more assistance than hitherto to the great cause. After a time she, too, ceased to listen to Carlton, but sat working out her own individual dreams.

Next to Joan sat Estelle, with a tender smile on her lips. The men and women in front and on all sides of her seemed in deadly earnest, but she knew that they were only play-acting. What had this meeting to do with the actualities of their lives? They had come together to hear speeches; but at home to-night, in the workshops to-morrow, the speeches would be forgotten, the struggle would continue. The speakers in this hall might show the relation of

the individual to the social life ; but, uninfluenced by their theories, each man would *still* obey the claims of his personal duty and personal inclination, forging unconsciously the links which bound him to the State. His social consciousness was unawakened ; his intellect refused to assimilate the speakers' words ; yet he listened to them with patient endurance. His own seriousness seemed to tickle his vanity, raising him in the scale of social importance.

Estelle was amused.

At last the resolution was moved and Carlton's speech was ended.

Before Ellis had time to continue the proceedings in due form, a burly voice from the background asked leave to move an amendment. The chairman told the speaker to come up to the platform.

'I prefers to stop where I am,' shouted the disturber ; and amid cries of 'Order!' and 'Chair!' and sundry other interruptions, he said : 'I beg to move that, since we are neither idiots nor children in this assembly, Mr. Carlton's arguments are absurd and irrelevant.'

At this point an effort was made to 'chuck

out' the speaker, but Mr. Carlton begged that he might have a fair hearing.

'Why can't he come up to the platform, then?' asked someone.

'He's afraid!' answered a woman.

A loud laugh greeted this taunt; the disturber was told by some of his friends 'to get up, then, and be quick about it.' These allies followed their hero to the platform, and helped him up, amid many coarse jokes.

'I say,' began the orator, swinging his arms vigorously in order to get the back of his collar comfortable—'I say that some of us are not idiots nor children here, and we're not going to stand Sunday-school cant, nor sit 'ere while it is being talked, neither. We have every right to drink what we chooses, and no law will ever make us drink different. What 'as Carlton got to come 'ere for? Let him go back to his clubs and his dinners and his champagne—let him leave us poor devils alone. Mr. Inglis'—a hushed groan greeted the name of the Tory candidate—'e says let every man have his pot of beer if 'e pays for it. 'E's a gentleman, is Mr. Inglis. So I begs to move that we'll return Inglis triumphant, and send

Carlton about his business—where 'e comes from, so to speak.'

The orator proceeded to descend from the platform amid some applause. One of his friends was about to mount, when the chairman jumped to his feet and began to speak. There was an angry flush on his face.

'Yes,' he began, 'you are idiots or children—you men and woman here—for you allow this bully, and fellows like him, to throw dust in your eyes. Do you think this question has anything to do with political principle? Does a man advise you to drink because he's a Tory or because he's a Liberal? No; he does it because he's a ruffian, and you are idiots enough to believe in his good faith. You are worse than idiots, you——'

'I say, are you going to stand this unparliamentary language? The man who talks like this isn't fit to be your chairman.'

So spoke a youth from the furthest end of the hall. At the same moment a rush was made from various parts to storm the platform.

Joan took hold of her husband's arm.

'Dick, there will be a free fight,' she said, 'and you will only have yourself to thank.'

Speak to them like a gentleman *to* gentlemen.'

There was a note of loving remonstrance in her voice. In a moment Ellis had pulled himself together, and was equal to the occasion. He banged the table.

'Friends, you misunderstand me,' he cried. 'I am not here to call you names. I am here to support Mr. Carlton, your old friend, who has this day told you how to be free men. The law shall make you free, and you shall make the law. I will tell you a story.'

Then, amid only a few interruptions, Ellis told them a good electioneering story, which had been tried before with complete success.

Soon laughter cleared the angry atmosphere, and the proceedings gradually became normal again. With a little management the disturbers were reduced to silence, and in time left the hall. After a few more speeches and a few carefully answered questions, a resolution in support of Carlton was passed *nem. con.*

The meeting sang once more 'He's a jolly good fellow!'

Joan looked radiantly happy. Someone caught sight of her as the people were dispersing, and cried out :

‘I believes in the red-haired woman what pulls the reins!’

THE END







